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Abstract

VIOLATING MATERNITY: SERVITUDE, SEXUAL ABUSE, LYNCHING AND THE (UN)MAKING OF THE BLACK MATERNAL SUBJECT

Michele Sharon Frank

Herman Beavers

This dissertation argues that African American women writers have identified the black maternal figure as a primary symbol of black cultural trauma. Through an examination of selected texts from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, I isolate writers' and dramatists' explorations of servitude, sexual abuse and lynching as systemic, historical violations of blackness and womanhood that have shaped black women's maternal experiences. African American women writers' depictions of black women's experience of and resistance to such systemic violations of themselves, their children, and their communities reveal how their traumatized subjectivities defy facile understandings of maternal connection, love and protection. This dissertation argues that the writers' construction of this maternal aesthetic signals an enduring concern with the intergenerational effects of compounded trauma and of black people's sometimes self-wounding efforts simultaneously to contest their violation and affirm their humanity. My dissertation explicates the texts' meanings within the socio-historical contexts of their creation and publication as well as on emphasizing attention to the periods of their representations. From its beginnings, African American literature has engaged both dominant and resistant ideologies of being in, first, the American Colonies and, later, the United States. Authors who have grown out of a markedly marginalized population have negotiated and participated in an artistically expressive tradition—literature—to which they routinely had been denied access and to which it was assumed they had little to contribute. African American literary and cultural criticism and Feminist Studies inform my methodology. While conversing with the theoretical constructs of Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction and New Historicism, Feminist and African American critical studies have insisted on modes of inquiry which foreground analyses of class, gender, race and, increasingly, sexuality as interconnected, systemic structures of identity that shape African American lives. These tropes of traumatic violation recur in other African American-authored texts, thereby corroborating my premise that a sustained explication of their representational significance contributes to the scholarly examination of the ways in which the symbolic work of cultural producers shapes our understanding of the formation of black subjectivities.

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VIOLATING MATERNITY: SERVITUDE, SEXUAL ABUSE, LYNCHING AND THE
(UN)MAKING OF THE BLACK MATERNAL SUBJECT

Michele Sharon Frank

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For my children, Chloe Grace and Asher Vincent: completing this journey with you and having you express pride in me has been the sweetest thing. You are my joy.

And

For Craig, my husband and partner: who knew there would be another miracle on 34th Street? Through it all, you believed. Always.

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PREFACE

My family stood on the other side, having been cleared. I confidently stepped into and out of the rectangular box. No beeping, of course, because I carried no weapons; I wore no belt and I could not carry change in my pocketless pants. Following previous instructions, I had bared my feet. So why was the white supervisor signaling to the nearest security guard, a black woman? Obeying his silent gestures, she stepped forward and blocked my path. “I have to check your hair.” My body stiffened and the shock I felt exploded in my question: “MY HAIR?!!”

Before I could fully comprehend what was happening to me, in front of my children, the guard’s latex-gloved hands reached for the scrunchie that held my mid-back-length locks in a ponytail. As the chill of the latex glided across my scalp, I demanded in disbelief, “do you search white women’s hair?” The guard remained silent, her face impassive. But the other black woman in this scene spoke up. I had noticed her in the line, a few people behind me. I had wondered if she had locked her hair recently or if she had just cut them, because they barely grazed her neck. ““Oh, they always check the locks,”” she calmly informed me, her own face a mixture of acceptance and empathy for my evident initiation into this particular policing of the black female body. My black maternal body: my two children stood on the other side, witnesses to my molestation. My rage grew. “Do you search white women’s hair!!?” I shouted, refusing to consider the possible ramifications of expressing my anger. After all, this was the Philadelphia International Airport in the post-September 11 era; I could be pulled out of line and

denied passage on our flight. They could handcuff me in front of my children. In one way, they already had. But I would not be silent. Not in front of my children.

The guard did not respond and would not meet my eyes. She stepped away from me. As I retrieved my shoes from the grey, rectangular tray, a black male security guard walked past me. He had taken in the whole scene in silence.

“Do you search white women’s hair?” I challenged again.

He smiled wryly: “If the machine says, search the hair, we search the hair.”

I gathered my things and joined my family. I continued to shake and fume while my husband and children attempted to soothe me, insisting that “it was ok.” But we all knew it was not ok. And we also knew it was complicated.

After my fellow dreadlocked traveler had come through her own molestation, she had taken a quick look at my waiting family and glanced back at me, as if to say, “You did not think that would protect you, did you?” My husband is white. He had stood next to our children during my search, assuring them that “Mama would be ok.” Our son, standing closest to him, had celebrated his 10th birthday the day before. Our 13-year-old daughter, whose undeniably black, wavy/curly twists were also pulled back in a scrunchie from the packs she and I share, stood next to them.

How could “It” be possibly “ok?”

My children had watched, helpless, as their mother had been policed—“racially profiled,” as my daughter later asserted. They had seen another black woman in the role of direct

agent of this policing. They had witnessed the harassment of yet another black woman, roughly the same age as their mother. As I stood in astonishment and rage at Philadelphia Airport, and during the weeks that followed, my mind sought a framework that would enable my comprehension of my and my family's experience.

In a moment that would have made Althusser, Foucault and their acolytes nod their heads in smug satisfaction, “The Machine” had unleashed a disciplinary directive that violated my maternal identity to the very core. Using all of its available apparatuses—including those with whom I share cultural histories and phenotypical intersectionalities and who must work in its employment in order to support themselves and, possibly, their families—“The Machine” had spoken with a certain kind of racially gendered eloquence that the French theorists had not specified but that, upon reflection, I realized, I and everyone else in that scene understood. And what might be the immediate and generational consequences of “The Machine”'s punitive protocols? Would my daughter—who loves to travel—be disinclined to groom her hair like her mother's, fearing a resemblance that “attracts” disciplinary attention? Would my son instinctively reject a hairstyle that millions of boys and men of African descent also choose, in a self-protective attempt to forestall the criminalization of his body that is likely to happen anyway?¹ Would my children place limits on their physical movement, their mobility—thereby rejecting their identities as national citizens and global subjects—because they anticipate and fear similar policing whenever they leave “home?”

¹When I recounted my airport experience to the man who styles my hair, he revealed that his locks had been searched at O'Hare International airport in Chicago.

I cannot answer these questions definitively, but I know they raced through my head as surely as the latexed fingers probed my scalp. So while I was outraged on my own behalf, I recognize that my anger also erupted for my children. How dare “The Machine” assault them through me? How dare “The Machine” act so benevolently towards the children of countless nonblack women who came before and after me in the security line? How dare “The Machine” engender more insecurities about my children’s safety? I hoped my children understood my enraged questions for what they were: my shocked, constrained, attempt to resist my violation; my insistence that I recognized “The Machine”’s determination to humiliate me and discipline us.

I understand that the twenty first-century, technological modalities with which the United States’ dominant cultural practices (“The Machine”) institutionalize racial, gender, and ethnic terrorization² represent contemporary iterations of the mechanisms of supremacist control that many African American women writers have situated at the center of their symbolic explorations of black subjectivity in general and black maternity in particular. My analyses of such figurative interrogations of black motherhood in the United States—and to a lesser extent the larger Black Atlantic—argue that cultural producers have identified this particular subject position, black motherhood, as a crucial site of the intersection of embodied blackness and womanhood whose examination exposes white supremacist and masculinist protocols of subjugation. African American women writers’ depictions of black women’s complicated experience of and resistance to

²I am fully aware that, in comparison to the treatment of those who are presumed to be Muslim and/or of Middle Eastern descent, my “screening” at the airport was, perhaps, relatively benign.

such systemic violations of themselves, their children, and their communities reveal how their traumatized subjectivities defy facile understandings of maternal connection, love and protection. This dissertation argues that the writers' construction of this maternal aesthetic signals an enduring concern with the intergenerational effects of compounded trauma and of black people's sometimes self-wounding efforts simultaneously to contest their violation and affirm their humanity.

My first chapter, "Sometimes Silence Speaks Louder Than Words: Harriet Wilson's Inscription of an Absent Black Maternal Discourse," argues that *Our Nig* inaugurates a non-enslaved maternal discourse of separation and loss that must wrestle with the prevalent contemporaneous symbolics of southern enslaved motherhood. But the chapter also contends that although Wilson's novel situates her explicit construction of black motherhood within the socioeconomic structures of northern, indentured servitude, too few critics have explored the ways in which erstwhile northern slavery forms a significant subtext in Wilson's narrative. Importantly, too, *Our Nig*'s inscription of traumatized black motherhood outside the bounds of legal enslavement prefigures later writers' imagination of black maternal subjectivity and relations as a central space of inquiry into the complex interplay of violence and resistance in black families and communities.

Following chapter one's emphasis on recognizing *Our Nig*'s inscription of black maternal trauma outside the primary symbolics of southern slavery, chapter two examines the refiguration of Brazilian slavery and its legacy of incestuous sexual abuse in one family in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*. This chapter, "Incestuous Origins and Maternal

Subjectivity in *Corregidora*,” contends that the novel constructs black maternal identity at the center of its insistence that the traumatized effects of sexual abuse must not be only or primarily understood as the consequences of individualized pathologies. Such effects, and the familial and communal ruptures they engender, must be contextualized within the systemic terrorization enacted by New World slavery as well as the multiple institutions of racial-sexual supremacy which survived legal emancipations.

Very few systemic mechanisms outside enslavement exemplified the ongoing determination to maintain white supremacy and black subjugation to the extent that lynching did in the decades following the abolition of slavery. Chapter three, “Murdering to Protect One’s Own: Trauma and Infanticide in Early Twentieth-Century African American Women’s Lynching Literature,” explores the relationship between lynching and black maternity in two plays and one short story from that period. The routine terrorization of African American communities through the mutilation, burning and murder of thousands of black people—primarily but not exclusively men—precipitated unprecedented African American political mobilization. This collective protest movement attracted many expressive artists, including Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson, whose fictional works constituted part of the contemporary anti-lynching crusade. The chapter focuses on Grimké’s and Johnson’s representations of lynching’s trauma through the deployment of maternal infanticide of black male children in the former’s *Rachel* and “The Closing Door,” and in the latter’s *Safe*. Both authors employed ideologically potent maternal discourses in order to emphasize black women’s exclusion from dominant cultural consideration. Their situation of black maternal figures

at the center of lynching's crisis also signaled their recognition that lynching functioned as a weapon of terror against African American communities, not only black individuals, and that, too often, violence against black women received secondary attention within black communities as well as in the larger society.

My final chapter, “‘Nothing Left For Us But Pour Out Our Own Blood’: Examining the Aftermath of Infanticide,” extends my interrogation of infanticide's trauma to Shirley Graham's play *It's Mornin'* and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Written almost forty years apart, these texts represent the maternal killing of female children as the consequence of the mothers' complicated determination to resist slavery's brutality. I argue that whereas Grimké's, Johnson's, and Graham's texts conclude with the children's deaths, Morrison's extended exploration in the 1980s of the personal, familial and communal aftermaths of such extreme maternal violence advances her examination of the ongoing legacies of slavery's primary trauma.

My Coda, “The Same Wounding...the Same Pain?” offers a brief, speculative reading of the maternal discourse in Ayana Mathis' 2013 novel, *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*. *Twelve Tribes'* inscription of black personal and familial trauma registers a profound ambivalence about connecting such pain, its effects and its affect, to a history of intergenerational violation—even as the novel frames this history within its margins and its subtext. I argue that evolving and competing meanings of race, class and gender in the post-Civil Rights era offer us an entry point from which we may begin to understand Mathis' narrative as well as recent cinematic deployments of black suffering and mourning.

Throughout this project I analyze a selected number of African American women writers' texts which construct black mothers and their relations within intersecting systems of violation and constrained modes of resistance. I have organized the chapters around three thematic developments: separation and loss (absence), incestuous sexual abuse, and maternal infanticide. These tropes of traumatic violation recur, to varying extents, in other African American-authored texts, thereby corroborating my premise that a sustained explication of their representational significance contributes to the scholarly examination of the ways in which the symbolic work of cultural producers shapes our understanding of the formation of black subjectivities.

My dissertation insists on explicating the texts' meanings within the socio-historical contexts of their creation and publication as well as on emphasizing attention to the periods of their representations. From its beginnings, African American literature has engaged what I would call both dominant and resistant *ideologies of being* in, first, the American Colonies and, later, the United States. That is, authors who have grown out of a markedly marginalized population have negotiated and participated in an artistically expressive tradition—literature—to which they routinely had been denied access and to which it was assumed they had little or nothing to contribute.

As a collective, African American women writers—no less nor more than their male counterparts—have rejected suggestions that the aesthetic value of their work depreciates in relation to understandings of its socio-historical contextualization. Indeed, the literature's consistent explorations of violent practices and subjugating institutions such as indentured servitude, enslavement, segregation, rape, lynching and so on compel

our recognition that we fail to appreciate the beautiful complexities of these texts if we do not critically accentuate their historical and cultural grounding.

My ongoing consideration of the beautiful complexity of this literature has been most enabled by African American literary and cultural criticism as well as Feminist studies. Both critical traditions—which often overlap in the scholarship of, say, Hortense Spillers, Valerie Smith, and Saidiya Hartman—have informed my own enterprise. While conversing with the theoretical constructs of, for instance, Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction and New Historicism, Feminist and African American critical studies have insisted on modes of inquiry which foreground analyses of class, gender, race and, increasingly, sexuality as interconnected, systemic structures of identity that shape African American lives—textual and “real.”

To the extent that art can help us understand our individual and collective selves, my selected texts constitute a relatively small—though by no means minor—part of a continuing tradition of expressivity that nurtures my intellectual growth and political sensibilities. I hope that my scholarship makes a valuable contribution to critical advancements around African American women’s cultural production and encourages the development of sympathetic political sensibilities in others.

CHAPTER 1

**Sometimes, Silence Speaks Louder Than Words: Harriet Wilson's Inscription Of
An Absent Black Maternal Discourse**

In 1859, Harriet Wilson published *Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*³, which both participated in and extended a nineteenth-century discourse of black maternal dispossession and separation. At the same time, Wilson's autobiographical novel prefigured a twentieth-century, African American symbolics of traumatized black motherhood that her literary successors examine through the thematics of lynching, incest, absence, and infanticide. The maternal poetics that *Our Nig* begins to construct provide a framework that also anticipates twentieth-century explorations of black women's reproductive autonomy and expressive sexuality as well as the ways in which their experiences of motherhood are always shaped by their racial status and socioeconomic position.

Wilson's narrative of black maternal loss and separation accords with former slave narrators' representations of what they identify as one of the fundamentally injurious threats to black subjectivity, namely, the arbitrary yet frequent separation of enslaved women from their children. *Our Nig* notably echoes Harriet Jacobs' fictionalized autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published two years after

³The complete title of Wilson's text reads, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In A Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There.* by "'Our Nig," Throughout my analysis, I cite the 1983 Vintage Books Edition, introduced and copyrighted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Wilson's text and much better known until the re-discovery and verification of the earlier narrative in the 1980s. Both authors explore the ways in which their early loss of maternal connection shape their respective experiences of oppressive servitude and the manner in which their survival of those experiences subsequently informs their understanding of their maternal identities—their conception of themselves as mothers and their relationship to their children.

Our Nig, however, departs from where *Incidents* leaves off. Jacobs concludes her narrative of maternal dispossession with the jarring image of protagonist Linda Brent's nonrecognition of her own daughter, her son's departure to the West, and her own employment as a live-in domestic servant in northern white households. Hers is not, ultimately, a sentimental story of domesticated marital bliss and familial reunification. In the narrative's final pages, instead, Jacobs' text emphasizes Linda's growing awareness that, while she has escaped the terrors of southern enslavement, she now lives within the bounds of northern racism, particularly its attendant economic deprivations and social subjugation. *Incidents* concludes that this institutional structure of white domination and black subordination threatens Linda's maternal identity and sustains an intergenerational legacy of maternal dispossession that began with her enslaved great-grandmother's life-story.

Wilson, Jacobs' contemporary, announces from the outset that her own narrative engages in an insistent critique of northern white supremacy. The author deploys a deliberately ironic title in order to emphasize the symbiotic relationship between southern slavery and northern racism. "Nig," an abbreviation of the reviled epithet, "nigger," had

never been titularly hurled, to my knowledge, by a former slave or free-born black writer in his or her abolitionist and/or anti-racist denunciation of institutionalized racism. As though fretful that her sarcastic juxtaposition of “Our Nig” and “Life of a Free Black” would escape readers’ comprehension, Wilson jettisons her assumption of ironic subtlety and declares that her story takes place “in a Two-Story White House, North Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There.”⁴ The preface that follows Wilson’s titular gauntlet goes further to establish the connections she draws between southern slavery and northern racial domination. Here, Wilson erases almost any distinction between the two systems of white supremacy when she emphasizes that her “mistress was wholly imbued with *southern* principles” (pref). Temporarily, at least, the “mistress” loses her northern identity, becoming entirely aligned with the institution of slavery and the ideological frameworks that support it.

⁴While announcing its engagement with the domestic thematics of sentimental fiction as well as the issues of slavery and ideologies of race represented in the slave narratives, the architectural specificity and symbolism of Wilson’s title also signals Wilson’s familiarity with the tropes of another contemporary emergent genre, American gothic fiction. In her study, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Teresa A. Goddu argues for a sustained reappraisal of an American gothic tradition which recognizes that the “gothic is intensely engaged with historical concerns” (p. 2). Goddu emphasizes that nineteenth-century American gothic writing emerged from the same antebellum context as the slave narratives and sentimental fiction. While Goddu uses her expansive reading of Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to substantiate her assertion that “the American gothic is haunted by race” and that “African-American literature provides a vantage point from which to revise critical readings of the American gothic,” Wilson’s titular gesture towards the gothic—along with the other representations of horror in the body of her narrative—underscores the multiple discourses that inform her text and that her own text appropriates and revises (p. 7, 12). In *Beloved*, her own 1987 “gothic” exploration of southern slavery and northern racism, Toni Morrison also deploys the architectural image of the two-story “gray and white house on Bluestone Road” (p. 3).

Wilson avers that her own experiences in the North have been so harrowing that, although she claims the authorial power to omit them, “the unprejudiced would declare [them] unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen” (pref). Thus Wilson issues her appeal “universally for patronage” to her “colored brethren.” The supplicant seems to have little expectation of extensive assistance from northern whites—even abolitionists—after asserting that her life as a “free black” in the center of anti-slavery agitation compared unfavorably to southern enslavement. Yet one wonders whether Wilson, by making this declaration, risked alienating not only white abolitionists but black northerners as well, many of whom would have been former slaves themselves. Wilson seems to have concluded that the risk was worth taking, hoping, probably knowing, that her story of northern racial degradation would resonate with her presumed black audience and that they would indeed “defend” and “support” her (pref.).

Wilson announces, however, that intraracial intellectual, social and emotional support is not her primary motive for her authorial debut. Rather, economic necessity compels her to write and publish: “Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” (pref).⁵ The economic destitution Wilson hopes to escape

⁵Others have noted that Wilson’s prefatory apology for her “crude narrations” participates in what had become a conventional performance by white and/or middle-class women writers in the nineteenth century. That is, such authors often justified their entries into the public, intellectual sphere by claiming economic compulsion and familial obligation. See, for instance, Claudia Tate, “Allegories of Black Female Desire; or, Rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority,” in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 111-16). Wilson clearly possessed a fierce intelligence that insisted on expression. But it is

with the sale of her book threatens not only herself but “myself and child,” an assertion which inscribes a precarious black maternal subjectivity—threatened by the same ideological conventions and material systems that attempt to suppress all forms of black autonomy and identity.

With the Preface’s assertion of the motivating factors behind her decision to write and publish, Wilson foregrounds her own maternal identity as the most crucial part of her biographical information. Yet, she quickly drops the issue. As she makes the generic shift from the first-person autobiographical Preface to a third-person fictionalized autobiography, she relegates the account of her own maternity to the end of Frado’s narrative, in the somewhat inaccurately titled section, “The Winding up of the Matter.” I say “inaccurately” because this putatively “last chapter” is followed by an extratextual Appendix that incorporates three letters which vouch for the authenticity of Wilson’s story and which add a great deal of texture to the preceding narrative.

When Wilson returns her focus to her own maternal subjectivity in the concluding chapter, she does so with a notably generic movement.⁶ Wilson begins this section in the first-person voice, referring to “my narrative.” The second sentence, however, shifts

important to recall that she was neither white nor middle-class. While I have no wish to dismiss her engagement in nineteenth-century women’s intellectual activity, cultural critics risk minimizing or erasing the historical specificity of Wilson’s racial and socioeconomic positions if they only, or even primarily, interpret her prefatory remarks as the coy deployment of literary convention. One need not subordinate Wilson’s explicit claim of economic compulsion to her implicit one of intellectual imperative. Both, I imagine, served as simultaneously powerful motivators.

⁶The formal structure of *Our Nig* has led to its categorization as an “experimental text—a hybrid of autobiography, fiction, and exposé.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), p. 439.

back to the conclusion of “Frado’s” story, an ending that emphasizes Frado’s maternal identity and that, within *Our Nig*’s narrative arc, aligns Wilson, the author, most closely with Frado, the protagonist *and* Wilson’s assumed fictional surrogate. Like Wilson who, in her prefatory self-presentation, is “forced” to seek help for “myself and child,” after being “deserted by kindred,” Frado must “toil for herself and child” almost immediately after parturition during her husband’s absence (128). Frado’s husband’s return enables some economic sustenance for a short period, but he leaves again. When he dies “after [a] long desertion,” Frado places her son in another woman’s care, “hoping to recruit her health, and gain an easier livelihood for herself and child” (128-9).

In its construction of both Wilson’s and Frado’s maternal identities, *Our Nig* offers a strikingly brief, but distinctly precarious, representation of northern black motherhood. Its brevity is particularly noteworthy because Wilson emphasizes that her determination to ensure her livelihood as a woman *and* mother (“myself and child”) occasions the publication of her narrative. The Appendices, too, assume a pronounced maternal focus. They highlight Wilson’s own maternal identity and relationship with her son while foregrounding her position as an impoverished, motherless daughter whose gratification in learning “the art of making hats” that she can sell in order to support herself is equaled only by her happiness in finding a maternal surrogate: “...I have at last found a *home*—and not only a home, but a *mother*. My cup runneth over” (133). A writer of the “Appendix,” “Allida,” quotes one of Wilson’s letters to “her mother Walker,” presumably after Wilson had given her the authorization to do so: “I could see my dear little room, with its pleasant eastern window opening to the morning; but more

than all, I beheld *you*, my mother, gliding softly in and kneeling by my bed to read, as no one but you *can* read, ‘The Lord is my shepherd—I shall not want.’ But I cannot go on, for tears blind me” (135). Wilson’s letter deploys a repertoire of sentimental imagery that equates maternity with religiosity even as it sardonically intimates that both religious and maternal plenitude remain the privilege of middle-class, white women. While Wilson may have the literal capability of reading the 23rd Psalm, her own experiences of “want” make it difficult not to question its relevance to her life as a poor, black woman.

A remarkable dissonance emerges between the extratextual black maternal framing of *Our Nig* and the muted inscription of a black maternal discourse in the narrative that lies in-between those frames. Indeed, *Our Nig*’s most striking maternal discourse centers on white mothers, specifically Frado’s mother, Mag, and Mrs. Bellmont, Frado’s mistress. We have, then, a narrative written by a black woman who asserts that her maternal identity has determined its publication; whose preface and appendices emphasize the complexity of that maternal subjectivity but whose figurative exploration almost erases the black maternal figure. What explains this vexed suppression? What do we know about contemporary maternal discursive practices that might enable our comprehension of this elision? What constrains Wilson’s creation of a sustained discourse of black maternity throughout *Our Nig*?

I argue that the pervasive and prevailing discourse of enslaved maternity in antebellum America—in both black- and white-produced texts, both abolitionist and proslavery cultural productions—rendered almost invisible any other conception of black motherhood. On the one hand, dominant sentimental inscriptions of motherhood

included only white, middle-class women within their ideological frameworks. On the other, narratives of southern slavery (abolitionist and apologist) foregrounded enslaved black mothers. Confronting this near invisibility, a symbolic blankness, Wilson struggles to construct an alternative maternal discourse that could represent black maternal experiences outside a slave economy and a southern landscape. *Our Nig*'s peripheral treatment of black maternity constitutes Wilson's simultaneous inscription and critique of the absence of a broader cultural imagination of multiple, black female subjectivities. Thus, paradoxically, black maternal *absence* emerges as the primary trope *Our Nig* deploys in its literary inauguration of a northern, black motherhood. Still, Wilson's narrative indicates that while the depiction of the historical conditions and symbolic tropes of southern, enslaved maternity cannot adequately chart the specific terrain it attempts to traverse, "slavery's shadows" inevitably shape its own figuration of a nineteenth-century black maternal subjectivity.

While most readers may conclude that those shadows emanate from the American South, it is important to recognize that Wilson also invokes the legacy of slavery in the northern United States. Undoubtedly, the more immediate context of southern slavery and rising abolitionist activity in the decades preceding the text's creation informs *Our Nig*'s portrait of hierarchical racial relations among its characters. Northern slavery and the legacy of racism it generated, however, constitute a secondary backdrop that shapes the white characters' denigration of Frado and, as a consequence, her experience of indentured servitude and, later, poverty in a market economy. The title's "Two-Story White House" memorializes the erstwhile enslavement of black people in southern *and*

northern states while it simultaneously denounces ongoing southern enslavement and northern white supremacy.

If, as researchers have conjectured, Wilson was born in New Hampshire—which also serves as the setting of her narrative—between 1824 and 1828, her birth came less than fifty years after that state began its *gradual* abolition of slavery in 1783.⁷ Massachusetts abolished slavery outright in the same year, ten years after the 1773 publication of the enslaved Phillis Wheatley’s book of poetry, but both Connecticut and Rhode Island issued their own gradual plans for emancipation one year later, in 1784. Although by the second decade of the nineteenth century census records did not identify any slaves in New Hampshire, the legal authority to grant anyone state citizenship, regardless of “descent,” was not extended until 1857, two years before Wilson published *Our Nig*. It is quite probable, then, that their northern enslavement was part of the living memory of some black people in New England during Wilson’s childhood. It is impossible to imagine, furthermore, that during the first half of the nineteenth century slavery did not form part of the northern black community’s collective memory of its recent past. As one historian writes, “the process of black community-building began in the years immediately after the Northern states signaled their complicity in slavery by agreeing to those sections in the Constitution that, in crucial ways, gave tacit support to

⁷In his introductory account of his verification of Wilson’s authorship of *Our Nig*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. concludes that the former Harriet Adams “was born a free black in 1827 or 1828.” Barbara A. White, who extends Gates’ work in her own investigations of Wilson’s life, speculates that the author “seems to have been born between 1824 and 1828” (Afterword, p. viii).

the ‘peculiar institution.’”⁸ Recent northern enslavement constitutes an important subtext of *Our Nig*’s explicit representation of Frado’s bondage within indentured service.

Although Wilson constructs Frado’s maternal story in the text’s concluding chapter when she is no longer indentured, the preceding account of Frado’s racial, economic, gender, and physical subordination within the Bellmont household defines her development from a motherless, overworked girl whose “time and person belonged solely” to Mrs. Bellmont to a debilitated woman whose frail health almost completely undermines her efforts to provide for herself and son (41). *Our Nig*’s characterization of Mrs. Bellmont’s ownership of her charge’s body and labor is but one example of Wilson’s extended deployment of the metaphor of slavery. As with so much else of her comparisons between the enslaved in the South and their nominally free northern counterparts, Wilson’s depiction of Frado’s life from tortured girlhood to frail womanhood/motherhood accords with Dorothy Roberts’ analysis of maternal health in slavery and provides a valuable framework to comprehend *Our Nig*’s exploration of black maternal subjectivity.

In her historical examination of “reproduction in bondage,” Roberts argues that as slaveholders sought to exploit black women as both producers of labor and reproducers of slaves, they often prized enslaved women’s fertility over their capacity to work. While, from the enslavers’ perspective, a woman might have a finite capacity to work, her ability to bear children guaranteed the cycle of (re)production that sustained the

⁸Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “Foreword,” in Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), p. xiv.

creation of wealth both in the form of more slaves and continued agricultural production.

Many slaveholders and their overseers, however, did not understand the relationship between physical vigor and healthy child-bearing:

Slaveowners who overworked their pregnant slaves operated under general ignorance about prenatal health combined with stereotypes about black women's natural propensity for childbirth. They were not fully aware of the extent of the damage their labor practices inflicted on their long-term human investment.⁹

Like her historical counterparts, Mrs. B., the “mistress” of the Bellmont household, does not consider the long-term effects that her excessive labor demands have on Frado’s health and potential fertility. Unlike the slaveholders, Mrs. B. need not consider Frado’s health at all because, unlike a slave, Frado is not a “long-term investment.” After Frado’s period of indenture, the Bellmonts would have no official claim to her labor nor would they own, in the contemporary parlance of the bills of sale, any “future increase” she might bear.¹⁰ Determined to exploit Frado’s capacity for work as much as possible during the years of her indenture, Mrs. B. scoffs at her son’s concern that his family “shall ruin her health making her work so hard” (88).¹¹ Mrs. B. rejects any consideration

⁹Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the black body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 25.

¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 80.

¹¹Mrs. Bellmont’s insistent and reckless exploitation of Frado as a domestic laborer prefigures the experience many black women would have with white domestic employers. Jacqueline Jones concludes that “domestic service recapitulated the mistress-slave relationship in the midst of late nineteenth-century industrializing America.” She continues, “the system of paid household labor...made manifest all the tensions and uncertainties inherent in personal interaction between the female members of two

of the young girl's physical vulnerability as she resorts to a construct of femininity from which Frado is definitively excluded:

‘You know these niggers are just like black snakes; you *can't* kill them. If she wasn't tough she would have been killed long ago. There was never one of my girls could do half the work' (88-9).

Mrs. B.'s derision ejects black women entirely beyond the boundaries of womanhood, imagining reptilian toughness as an innately racialized characteristic that precludes any inclusion in normative frail and white femininity.¹² Yet *Our Nig*'s insistence on identifying the particularities of Frado's physical deterioration under such toil, along with the other characters' recognition of her debilitation, repudiates Mrs. B.'s construction of a normative femininity that does not account for Frado's racialized experience of coerced female labor. In her contestation of any naturalized conception of frail femininity, Wilson offers an alternative construction of womanhood to include black women whose physical and emotional *exploitation* engenders the weakened condition attributed to and prized in white women. Her (re)construction implies that white women's femininity derives from their socially-endorsed privileges and not from a naturally superior racial identity.

Our Nig inscribes a racialized experience of black female labor that is wholly shaped by its appropriation and abuse by northern agents of white supremacy. In practice, this racial domination threatens black female economic independence which,

different classes and races.” *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 127.

¹²It is not clear if she speaks of her own daughters or of white domestic servants. In either case, Frado's blackness excludes her from Mrs. B's conception of femininity.

ultimately, imperils an empowered black maternity. When Frado is finally released from her indenture with only “a present of a silver half dollar” after twelve years of unceasing labor, she “engaged to work for a family a mile distant” from the Bellmonts even though she remains concerned that her delicate health might impede her efforts:

The first summer passed pleasantly, and the wages earned were expended in garments necessary for health and cleanliness. Though feeble, she was well satisfied with her progress. Shut up in her room, after toil was finished, she studied what poor samples of apparel she had, and, for the first time, prepared her own garments (117).

Frado desires financial autonomy in order to procure the necessities that mark her reclamation of her basic humanity after her long-term degradation in the Bellmont household. The passage’s delineation of her private pursuits and pleasures, presented in a rhythmic chant of temporal ownership (“first summer,” “first time”) reinforces this period as one of self-discovery. *Our Nig* emphasizes that Frado’s satisfaction in her relative financial independence comprises an integral part of its emergent definition of black womanhood. Frado has begun to come in to her own as a woman precisely because she embraces her ability—albeit limited—to support herself economically.

Frado’s financial independence is short-lived, however, because she quickly becomes “thoroughly sick” (118). Unable to work, she is taken back to the Bellmonts where the family does not welcome her into the primary residence but, instead, “remove[s] [her] to a room built out from the main building, used formerly as a workshop, where cold and rain found unobstructed access” (118-19). The former workhorse is relegated to the former workshop when “it” can no longer be put to service.

Frado eventually recovers and leaves the Bellmonts but the section that follows her final departure compresses the account of three years of her life during which she alternates between “sickness and feeble health” and remains dependent upon private largess and public charity.

A partial convalescence enables Frado to support herself with work as a seamstress, re-establishing some of the economic independence that the narrative offers as crucial for an empowered, viable black womanhood. The necessity of such self-sufficiency accentuates the risk of a black woman, like Frado, who might look to romance and marriage as a reprieve from the always-present burdens of poverty. *Our Nig* suggests that black women’s particularly subjugated status at the crossroads of gender, class, and race does not afford them the luxury of a conception of romance and marriage that is predicated on female dependence and male provision. Tragically, if temporarily, Frado misunderstands the significant differences between the dominant idealizations of romantic love for sentimental heroines and her own social position: “Here were Frado’s first feelings of trust and repose on human arm. She realized for the first time, the relief of looking to another for comfortable support... [but] of course he had little spare money” (127).¹³ Wilson’s economic language conflates Frado’s pecuniary and emotional interests in her decision to marry, underscoring the inextricability of romance and money that feminist critics have argued often govern

¹³In another instance of the kind of textual repetition that tightly structures *Our Nig*, Wilson repeats the rhythmic chant of “first time” here to underscore Frado’s new desire for economic dependence, ironically recalling the passage five pages earlier when the phrase was employed to emphasize Frado’s desire for economic independence.

heterosexual relations.¹⁴ Wilson's use of this language, however, does not endorse the financial and emotional interconnection. Rather, her deployment exposes its risks for a poor, black woman who subscribes to it.

Failing to comprehend that she cannot afford to become anyone's dependent, especially that of an equally poor, black man, Frado "for the first time" attempts to situate herself as a white and/or middle-class romantic heroine. I deliberately use the phrase "romantic heroine" rather than, say, "white woman," because the language Wilson employs in order to represent Frado's and Samuel's courtship recalls the generic conventions of popular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Her inscription discloses the ideological construction of idealized womanhood:

Such a one appeared in the new home of Frado; and as people of color were rare there, was it strange she should attract her dark brother; that...he should succeed in seeing her, feel a strange sensation in his heart towards her; that he should toy with her shining curls, feel proud to provoke her smile and expose the ivory concealed by their, ruby lips, that her sparkling eyes should fascinate; that he should propose that they should marry (126)?

¹⁴Wilson explicitly engages the ways in which economic considerations shaped white heterosexual relationships in her portrayal of two of the Bellmont offspring's courtship and marital choices. Although James "married a Baltimorean lady of wealthy parentage, an indispensable requisite, his mother taught him," the narrator assures us that "he did not marry her wealth, though; he loved *her* sincerely" thus reinforcing his moral standing in the text's characterization of him as one of Frado's true defenders (55). An even more elaborate economic discourse constitutes the narration of Jane's courtships. "Although an invalid," Jane's "social, gentle, loving nature" ensures her inclusion in society. Yet, the narrator asks somewhat rhetorically, "was it strange *she* should seem a desirable companion, a treasure as a wife?" A rather elaborate response to this question begins with the information that "two young men seemed desirous of possessing her." One, Henry Reed, particularly attracts Mrs. Bellmont because "she had counted the acres which were to be transmitted to an only son; she knew there was silver in the purse; she would not have Jane too sentimental." For her part, Jane "doubted if [Henry] would desire her, if he did not know she would bring a handsome patrimony" (55-6).

Although Frado, with her “thin, ruby lips,” “sparkling eyes” and “shining curls” may phenotypically resemble prevailing models of “beautiful,” sentimental heroines, her own experiences (and that of her mother’s) expose the romanticized ideal as a fraudulent one. By ignoring her own personal and maternal histories, while embracing dominant constructs of love, courtship, and marriage that minimize or deny their relationship to material structures and practices, Frado increases her vulnerability to Samuel’s advances.

With its visual imagery, this passage also commands the reader’s attention to its relatively detailed portrait of Frado. In doing so, it illustrates what some scholars have identified as an increasingly pervasive visual economy that shaped antebellum perceptions of gender and race.¹⁵ Prior to this moment, *Our Nig*’s attention to Frado’s body lay in its representations of its violations and constraints—that is, its captivity within the Bellmonts’ system of coerced servitude. Frado’s entrance into a different economy—romance—demands the accentuation of another set of her corporeal “goods,” including features that approximate those valorized by emergent advertising and fashion industries in the United States.

Notwithstanding its indication of its awareness of, and participation in, mid-nineteenth-century visual cultural productions, *Our Nig* primarily situates Frado as a reader of literary texts. The section that immediately precedes Frado’s relationship with

¹⁵See, for example, “Isabelle Lehuu’s “Sentimental Figures: Reading *Godey’s Lady’s Book* in Antebellum America,” in *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 73-91.

Samuel notably emphasizes her literary engagement, encouraged by a benefactress “who sought also to teach her the value of books”:

And while one read to the other of deeds historic and names renowned, Frado experienced a new impulse. She felt herself capable of elevation; she felt that this book information supplied an undefined dissatisfaction she had long felt, but could not express. Every leisure moment was carefully applied to self-improvement... (124).

Here, Wilson engages a standard and ideologically potent trope of the slave narratives—the connection the black person makes between literacy and his or her emerging sense of an autonomous self. In perhaps the most cited representation of such “scenes of instruction” and their consequences, Frederick Douglass recalls how he fully “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” when his master forbade his mistress and teacher, Mrs. Auld, to teach him how to read because “he would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.”¹⁶ Yet Wilson reconfigures this trope to suggest a more complicated relationship between her black *female* subject and literacy. Although the text implicitly endorses the role literacy plays in shaping Frado’s intellectual development—not only are books Frado’s “constant companions” with which she “strive[s] to enrich her mind; they’re nothing less than “soul refreshment” (115-16)—it intimates that black women must judiciously discern the lessons to which they attend because Frado’s romantic education through books, in fact, undermines the relative independence she had secured.

¹⁶*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written By Himself*, 1845. Edited by John Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 31.

Our Nig does not offer specific titular references so one cannot determine precisely what books inscribe such “historic” and “renowned” accounts. One surmises, however, that romantic and sentimental texts would constitute part of Wilson’s implied library. Critics like Shirley Samuels and Isabelle Lehuu argue also that the “aesthetics of sentiment [which] appear[ed] in advice books, statues, photographs, pamphlets, lyric poems, fashion advertisements and novels” during the “classic moment of sentimentality in the antebellum period” sought to reinforce a regime of “self-improvement” that was deemed essential and appropriate for a growing white, middle-class with access to “leisure.”¹⁷ Although *Our Nig* does not disparage Frado’s project of self-improvement—perhaps indicating that even those who were excluded from the primary intended audience of the sentimental enterprise could appropriate its aesthetic strategies for their own means¹⁸—the narrative nevertheless questions the extent to which such aspirational texts could offer any “value” for Frado, “she, black, feeble, and poor” (124).

Wilson foregrounds this interrogation of racial, socioeconomic, and gendered “usefulness” with the assertion that “she felt herself capable of elevation,” language which echoes the depiction of Frado’s mother’s naïve anticipation of “an elevation before unaspired to” when she unsuccessfully attempts to escape her own poverty through a romantic relationship with a wealthy man (5). Extending its formulation of the connections it draws between Frado’s sense of her identity in relation, or sometimes in opposition, to the white women with whom she interacts, *Our Nig* reveals that the

¹⁷“Introduction,” in *The Culture of Sentiment*, p. 3-8.

¹⁸Laura Wexler identifies as the “unintended reader” of sentimental narratives “readers who were *not* the ones that sentimental authors, publishers, critical spokesmen, or the nascent advertising industry had in mind.” “Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform,” in *The Culture of Sentiment*, p. 18.

“instructress” who introduces Frado to these symbolic registers of identity refashioning—“this book information”—is herself a white “plain, poor simple woman” whose brief characterization recalls that of Mag, Frado’s mother. Although she remains nameless, this woman functions as a maternal surrogate “who could see merit beneath a dark skin; and when the invalid mulatto told her sorrows, she opened her door and her heart, and took the stranger in” (124).

In reaching out to Frado, this woman rejects the hierarchical signification her culture attributes to racial differences, perhaps on the basis of their shared economic subordination. She also adheres to and defies sentimental classification. On the one hand, her socioeconomic status marks her exclusion from the normative definition of sentimental middle-class womanhood. On the other, the forceful connection the narrative forges between her emotionally benevolent maternity (“her heart”) and her Christian compassion (“took the stranger in”) establishes her sentimental figuration. *Our Nig* manipulates the symbol, “sentimental woman,” however, in order to reveal its limitations even further. It simultaneously represents a poor, white woman as one of its legitimate representatives of sentimentalism while implicitly acknowledging that even this kind of appropriative manipulation cannot adequately address Frado’s situation because neither the romantic nor sentimental education that her maternal surrogate oversees prepares her to fully comprehend and negotiate her relationship with Samuel.

Our Nig’s construction of Frado’s complicated relationship and marriage to Samuel magnifies its examination of Frado’s motherlessness as well as her maternal inheritance. While, as I argue above, the narrative implicitly criticizes the white maternal surrogate who encourages and enables Frado’s acceptance of the romantic ideal, it

explicitly represents Samuel, the putative ex-slave and anti-slavery lecturer who ultimately discloses that “his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists,” as a fraud (128). The narrative’s representation of Samuel highlights Frado’s familial and racial isolation, emphasizing not only a parental—specifically maternal—absence but also a black communal one.¹⁹ This dual absence nullifies Frado’s ability to recognize Samuel as an imposter and to comprehend his seduction schemes. Samuel successfully deceives Frado because, despite the contradictory signs of his racial experiences and rhetorical authenticity, she cannot rely on maternal or black communal counsel in order to assess his intentions. Although the narrative emphasizes that a “short acquaintance was indeed an objection” to the couple’s marriage, Frado has no mother, indeed no one, whose interest in her welfare might encourage some skepticism about the previously unknown suitor (126).

Our Nig’s treatment of the couple’s attraction underscores the absence—and thus the value—of familial and communal supports for Frado in its striking conflation of familial, racial, and romantic language. While both their racial affiliation and isolation occasion Frado’s and Samuel’s initial acquaintance “as people of color were rare there,” Frado’s attraction to “her dark brother” speaks to both her hope for racial affinity as well as her familial yearnings (Ibid). This longing has its roots in her father’s death but intensifies with the loss of her mother who abandons her, taking the younger sister with her not long after he dies. Moreover, a larger black community to which the narrative

¹⁹Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which I examine in the fourth chapter, also explores the signification of maternal absence and communal isolation in the formation of identity for a nineteenth-century black woman through her characterization of her maternal protagonist, Sethe.

gestures—embodied by Frado’s father, common-law stepfather, Pete Greene and playmate and into which her white mother had been incorporated—disappears after her mother’s abandonment.²⁰ Mag’s removal of herself from Frado’s life, precipitated by financial desperation, signifies the loss of her remaining family and her community. Consequently, Samuel, the first black person with whom Frado has any relations after twelve years of racial isolation and familial absence, becomes invested with her desire to mitigate both.

Already marked as a racial brother (though not yet “brotha” in twentieth-century signifying), Samuel’s emergence as both a figurative sibling and romantic suitor establishes his and Frado’s relationship as symbolically incestuous, a trope of African American origins and relations that my subsequent chapter on Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* extensively examines. But *Our Nig* contains its gesture towards the incest taboo within the figurative realm only, overtly inscribing Frado’s and Samuel’s relationship as a culturally-sanctioned seduction and courtship and leaving no doubt about their mutual physical attraction. While Samuel is drawn to Frado’s “ruby lips,” “shining curls,” etc., she is attracted equally to the “fine, straight negro, whose back showed no marks of the

²⁰Unlike most nineteenth-century inscriptions of African-American racial inheritance, *Our Nig*’s represents a mixed-race child who inherits her blackness from the father whose presence guarantees her inclusion in a larger black communal space. His death, however, leaves his daughter both paternally and communally destitute. Given the significant increase in interracial relationships and marriages between black men and white women in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, particularly in the post-Civil Rights era, it would be interesting to consider the ways in which Wilson’s narrative prefigures—or fails to—the significance of the white maternal and black paternal identity on the racial self-perception of children from those unions.

lash" (127).²¹ Perhaps inevitably, given the literary conventions and historical period in which she writes, Wilson immediately softens this sexually-charged characterization of a black couple's courtship, deflecting readers' attention away from Frado's familiarity with Samuel's body. Wilson attempts to negotiate an inscription of black women as desiring, (hetero)sexual subjects in a cultural space which denied such an identity to respectable white women and in which black women were denigrated as excessively carnal, always-already sexually "other." Hence the expressive, corporeal black sexuality to which this passage points becomes subsumed within a more conventional description of the couple's "silent sympathy" and the "presence of love" (127).

The story of Frado's seduction demands our attention for yet another reason. As the narrative's culminating tale of romantic love and betrayal, it brings *Our Nig* full circle, but with a significant racial twist. *Our Nig* opens with the portrayal of Frado's mother's own seduction by an unnamed man whose economic and social superiority persuades Mag Smith to "surrender to him a priceless gem" in order to secure a special

²¹Until she learns otherwise from his "confession," Frado believes Samuel's assertions about his past enslavement. She finds him compelling, in part, because his body does not bear the markings of enslavement in the way that the other "professed fugitives from slavery" whom she had encountered had (126). It is as though Samuel functions as a tabula rasa upon which Frado can inscribe her desires—romantic and racial. Here, ironically, Wilson situates Frado in a position similar to that of the anti-slavery whites whom both Frado and the text denounce, although with different motivations. Like Frado, the "*hungry* abolitionists" project their own racial desires on to Samuel, ignoring the discrepancy between his "illiterate harangues" and his "fineness" in order to insist on a recent history of enslavement against which they could "awaken the[ir] indignation" (my italics; 127-28). *Our Nig*'s imagery suggests white northerners' desire to consume the black body in a manner reminiscent of southern slaveowners' exploitation of black bodies. Although the narrative does not equate the two, its analogy continues to construct an episteme that underscores the national character of black subjugation.

“elevation before unaspired to” (5-6).²² Mag’s lover abandons her after his sexual triumph, leaving the pregnant and unmarried young woman to confront the consequences of her transgression of her community’s social-sexual norms of behavior. The opening section thus recounts a story of seduction that the text’s final pages echo and presents the maternal type that foreshadows Frado’s own maternity. Symmetrical, however, does not mean identical: the mother’s and daughter’s stories highlight racial and socioeconomic differences. Although both Mag and her daughter are seduced, for instance, the respective racial identity and financial status of their seducers carry varying implications. *Our Nig* never ascribes an explicit racial identity to Mag’s nameless seducer.²³ Instead, Wilson engages a repertoire of economic and social signifiers that function as mid-nineteenth-century racial markings as well. Readers understand, then, that only a white man with significant wealth could offer “ease and plenty” to Mag; that, for Mag, only a white man stands as her social superior, “alluring her upward and onward. She thought she could ascend to him and become an equal” (5-6). The relationship does not last because once Mag becomes pregnant, her rich, white lover abandons her. When her first-born daughter dies a few weeks after birth, Mag expresses only relief because “no one can taunt her with my ruin”(6).

²²Other critics have noted Wilson’s adherence to the conventions of the gender-class dyad in the eighteenth seduction novel, *Pamela*. See, example, P. Gabrielle Foreman’s introduction to *Our Nig*, Claudia Tate’s chapter, “Maternal Discourse as Antebellum Protest,” in *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and Ronna C. Johnson’s “Said But Not Spoken: Elision and the Representation of Rape, Race, and Gender in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig*” in *Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers*, ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 96-116.

²³Mag herself receives her racial designation by default and contrast when the text introduces Jim, the “kind-hearted African” who fathers Frado.

Samuel, too, seduces but, as I note above, Wilson presents Frado's and Samuel's relationship as one of mutual attraction. Importantly, too, they occupy comparable social positions vis-à-vis class and race. Yet one of the most critical differences *Our Nig* delineates in its portrayal of Frado's and Mag's seductions are the respective marital and maternal consequences for the two women. While Mag is abandoned by her lover, Frado and Samuel marry before the birth of their child. In a socio-historical context in which dominant discourses primarily situated black motherhood outside the boundaries of social respect and, in the case of enslaved mothers, legal protection, *Our Nig* legitimizes Frado's maternity within the "sanctity" of marriage—even as it refuses to romanticize both marriage and maternity.

Our Nig also reinforces its construction of black maternity as legitimate—though precarious and constrained—by what I will call the dual racialization or figurative blackening of Mag, primarily through its representation of her marriage to Jim. By marrying Jim and becoming the mother of their children, Mag becomes a figurative black mother. Within the text's configuration of the economic underpinnings of heterosexual relations, Mag's virginity is a "priceless gem" that her white lover "proudly garners as a trophy" (6). Further characterizing white womanhood as a desirable unit of possession and exchange but adding the complication of race, *Our Nig* describes Mag as Jim's "treasure—a white wife—"who is "as much of a prize to me as she'd fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks" (14, 11). As a poor, black laborer, Jim can only possess a white trophy wife, his "prize," once her value has fallen when the white community rejects her as tarnished and ruined. Yet as pitiful as Jim's racialized sexual desire may seem, the narrative establishes him as the morally superior character when compared to

Mag's lover, the white community, or even Mag herself.²⁴ The text emphasizes Jim's sexual attraction to Mag's whiteness:

He thought of the pleasing contrast between her fair face and his own dark skin; the smooth, straight hair, which he had once, in expression of pity, kindly stroked on her now wrinkled but once fair brow. There was a tempest gathering in his heart, and at last, to ease his pent-up passion, he exclaimed aloud 'by, golly!' (11)

While the narrative indicates that Mag's sexual appeal to Jim lies primarily in the white femininity to which black men were forbidden access, it simultaneously uses the section to accentuate his honorable qualities, thereby comparing him favorably against Mag's former lover and the surrounding white community. Jim does not seduce, desert or shun her for her past transgressions. Rather, he draws a moral equivalence between himself and Mag: "' I don't care for past things. I've done things 'fore now I's 'shamed of'" (Ibid). Both this moral equation—which, for Jim, mitigates the racial distance between himself and Mag—and sexual attraction enable his marriage proposal.

Their marriage has legal standing in their New England state but mid-nineteenth century antagonisms against the "evils of amalgamation" deny it social approbation (13). Therefore, when Mag marries Jim and gives birth to their children, she "was now expelled from companionship with white people; this last step—her union with a black—was the climax of repulsion" (15). Although in her historical study, *White Women, Black*

²⁴*Our Nig* does not condemn Mag for marrying Jim out of economic desperation. In one of its rare apostrophes, it admonishes "You can philosophize, gentle reader, upon the impropriety of such unions, and preach dozens of sermons on the evils of amalgamation. Want is a more powerful philosopher and preacher" (13). It does, however, criticize her selfishness, underscoring that "she cared for him only as a means to subserve her own comfort" (15).

Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century South, Martha Hodes focuses primarily on the titular interracial sexual relations in states below the Mason-Dixon Line, she observes also that “white Northern ideas about race, gender, and sexuality were no more straightforward than white Southern ideas.”²⁵ White Northerners, too, viewed sexual relations between white women and black men as a threat to the “purity” of white womanhood which was upheld as the foundation of continued white dominance. Hodes writes that in 1858, a year before the publication of *Our Nig*, “a white Georgian wrote disdainfully of supposed Northern marriages between black men and white women: ‘Do not many of our pretty white girls even now, permit illicit negro embrace at the South.... We have as many of these black devils to manage now, and keep *from our women*, as we can.’”²⁶ This diatribe signals the antebellum genesis of the full-blown hatred that followed slavery’s abolition and that was used as a rallying cry to justify the lynching of black men well into the twentieth-century, the thematic concern of the texts I analyze in my third chapter. Although this white man’s disgust implies that he believed white Northerners had developed a permissive attitude towards interracial marriages that he feared would be adopted by white Southerners, Wilson’s depiction of the white community’s response to Mag’s and Jim’s marriage repudiates any assumption of such white Northern forbearance.

Idealized as the reproducers of the white race and protectors of white racial purity, white women forfeited claims to the privileges accorded white womanhood for any known sexual relations with black men, although the degree of forfeiture was usually

²⁵(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 131.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 134.

dependent on the white woman's class position. Again, Hodes' examination of antebellum cultural attitudes towards interracial sexual relations clarifies this socioeconomic differentiation: "the danger of a liaison across the color line was graver for black men and elite white women because those women were at the center of white Southern ideas about female purity."²⁷ The consequences for a wealthier white woman could include not only the loss of her status as a "lady" but also her permanent removal from her home and community.²⁸ Upon the discovery of an interracial liaison or upon giving birth to a child who was identifiably of African descent, an affluent white woman might be sent away to other relatives or simply given money to move to another community far away from her own. Hodes indicates that such relationships between black men and high-status women were not frequently documented because elite white women often "were protected from censure by those who held authority in their communities and by dominant ideas about white female virtue."²⁹ On the other hand, "dominant ideas about poor white women included convictions about their promiscuity and debauchery" which denied them full inclusion in the idealized category of pure

²⁷Ibid.p. 5.

²⁸Toni Morrison gives figurative expression to this historical phenomenon in her 1992 novel *Jazz*. When Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of a plantation owner, becomes pregnant by "a Negro boy from out Vienna way," her parents do not hide their revulsion. Her father physically assaults her but the "mother, however, had the final cut: her eyebrows were perfectly still but the look she gave Vera Louise as the girl struggled up from the floor was so full of repulsion the daughter could taste the sour saliva gathering under her mother's tongue.... No word, then or ever, passed between them. And the lingerie case full of money that lay on Vera's pillow the following Wednesday was, in its generosity, heavy with contempt. More money than anybody in the world needed for seven months or so away from home. So much money the message was indisputable: die, or live if you like, elsewhere" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), p. 140-41.

²⁹Ibid., p. 135.

womanhood. If, as one critic has asserted, “poverty defeminized white women,”³⁰ a poor, white woman’s intentional sexual relationship with a black man was viewed as further evidence of her “natural” degeneracy and severed any tenuous hold she may have had on white femininity. The very intimacy of her association with blackness, furthermore, would also racialize her defeminization, placing her irredeemably outside the bounds of whiteness and aligning her with the figure of the black woman, the quintessential nineteenth-century representative of allegedly innate sexual and racial depravity and presumed “natural” partner of the black man.

Our Nig’s characterization of Mag charts her descent from poor “womanhood, unprotected, uncherished, uncared for” to one whom white people, according to Jim, refuse to “come near ye to see if you’s dead or alive” and, finally, to a full “outcast” as the interracial married mother of black children (12).³¹ Symbolically, Mag forfeits her whiteness—her relative elevation above black people—as a consequence of her interracial marriage and motherhood. Excluded from the terms of dominant prescriptions

³⁰Ibid., p. 5. Hodes quotes Victoria E. Bynum: “Poverty defeminized white women much as race defeminized black women.” While Bynum’s insight directs our attention to the crucial ways in which socioeconomic status shapes white women’s experiences, the comparison they delineate between class and race neglects the integrated ways in which both class and race (not to mention the status of free or enslaved) overdetermined the defeminization of black women.

³¹Wilson’s choice not to explicitly identify Mag’s race in the opening pages while emphasizing her poverty underscores her engagement with Mag’s class-based exclusion from idealized nineteenth-century female whiteness. That engagement, however, rejects the terms of such idealization, emphasizing the socioeconomic conditions—Mag is a penniless orphan—in which she must struggle. Immediately dismissing any assumptions of innate “promiscuity” or “debauchery” about the poor, white woman, Wilson stresses that Mag “*had* a loving, trusting heart” before her “ruin.” In fact, it is the wealthy, white man, Mag’s seducer, who—who in the undetected guise of Lucifer (“she knew thse voice of her charmer, so ravishing, sounded far above her”)—delights in sexual “promiscuity,” seducing and abandoning Mag in the same way he had done to his “other victims” (6).

of true, white womanhood and, as the mother of two mulattos—“pretty” though they may be—she emerges as a figurative black mother. The narrative reinforces this racial transformation in the scene during which Mag and Seth quarrel about their economic prospects. After Jim’s death, Mag had “*entered the darkness* of perpetual infamy” by cohabiting with Seth, Jim’s business partner, and by rejecting marriage, the “rite of civilization or Christianity” (16; my emphasis).

Economically strapped, Seth argues that they must give the children away and attempt to get work in “some other place”:

‘Who’ll take the black devils?’³² snarled Mag.

‘They’re none of mine,’ said Seth; ‘what you growling about?’

‘Nobody will want anything of mine, or yours either,’ she replied (16-17).

As she recognizes that she now occupies the same racial and socioeconomic terrain as Seth, a poor black laborer, Mag understands the full denigration of her maternal

³²In an instance of contemporary ironic intertextuality, Wilson’s Mag uses the very same satanic epithet (“black devils”) to characterize her own mulatto (a term I use deliberately for its nineteenth-century connotations of racial contagion, impurity and bastardy rather than, say, biracial or even mixed-raced) children as the one used by the aforementioned white Georgian who used it to denigrate black men whose sexual relations with white women would produce, he feared, even more mulatto “black devils.” Although Mag’s retort reflects her anger about her family’s debased condition as well as her consciousness about the racism directed at her children, Wilson’s deployment of the same phrase indicates *Our Nig*’s exploration about the mother’s ambivalence about her children’s black identities—after all, their racial status has transformed her own. (Parenthetically, these last two footnotes draw our attention to Wilson’s variously complicated deployment throughout her narrative of the figure of Satan and the larger Judeo-Christian framework from which he comes.)

identity—“any thing” of hers is undesirable. This comprehension of her racial degeneration and economic desperation convinces Mag that leaving Frado with the Bellmonts is her best option, notwithstanding her own conclusion that Mrs. Bellmont is a “she-devil” (17). The narrative implies that Mag hopes for only a temporary separation from her daughter, but the reunion “never came. It was the last time [Frado] saw or heard of her mother” (23). The maternal-child separation occasioned by Mag’s poverty and desertion immerses Frado in the slave-like conditions that *Our Nig* presents as northern indentured service for a motherless black child. Wilson’s text represents racial and economic structures of domination and subordination in the North that produce the maternal-child separation which, in turn, forces the black child into literal indentured service and symbolic slavery. When that child grows to maturity and becomes a mother, the intergenerational poverty that restricts her own livelihood forces her own separation from her son.

Our Nig’s focus on Frado within its exploration of the maternal-child separation differentiates itself from Jacobs’ *Incidents*, which emphasizes its protagonist’s perspective as the separated mother. In comparison, Wilson accords relatively brief treatment to Frado as the adult, absent mother. Most of her text’s examination of the consequences of maternal separation accentuates, instead, Frado’s experiences as the deserted child. One recalls, for example, Linda Brent’s strategic self-imprisonment in her grandmother’s garret in order to thwart Flint’s plans when reading the account of Frado’s arrival in her new “quarters” in the Bellmont house:

It was not quite dark, so they ascended the stairs without any light, passing through nicely furnished rooms, which

were a source of great amazement to the child. He opened the door which connected with her room by a dark, unfinished, passageway. ‘Don’t bump your head,’ said Jack and stepped before to open the door leading into her apartment—an unfinished chamber over the kitchen, the roof slanting nearly to the floor, so that the bed could stand only in the middle of the room. A small half window furnished light and air. Jack returned to the sitting room with the remark that the child would soon outgrow those quarters.

‘When she *does*, she’ll outgrow the house,’ remarked the mother” (27-28).

Unlike Jacobs’ protagonist, whose reliance on her black grandmother enables her to reconfigure her space of confinement into a transitional site of evasion—if not freedom—six-year old, motherless Frado’s “apartment”—inevitably situated “over the kitchen”—architecturally symbolizes the multiple socio-cultural sites of powerlessness that she occupies: racial, economic, sexual, and familial. Wilson’s inscription of this architectural space—the cramped, domestic precinct—also prefigures the kind of spatial poetics that inform the representation of black womanhood beyond the nineteenth century.

As the narrative expansively represents Frado’s subjugation, it explicitly connects it to her black motherlessness, both literal and figurative. Not yet fully cognizant of her culturally-determined identity as a poor, black girl, Frado initially believes that she has autonomy and is naturally endowed to exercise free choice: “she was of wilful, determined nature, a stranger to fear, and would not hesitate to wander away should she decide to (28). The following passage comes directly after Mrs. Bellmont’s remark—

which Frado does not hear—and emphasizes Frado’s ignorance and naïvete (“her little mind”) as well as the social initiation she will be forced to endure:

She remembered the conversation of her mother with Seth, the words ‘given away’ which she heard used in reference to herself; and *though she did not know their full import*, she thought she should, by remaining, be in some relation to white people she was never favored with before. So she resolved to tarry, with the hope that mother would come and get her some time (28; my emphasis).

Frado does not yet understand that only objects can be “given away,” that she is not an autonomous subject who can “determine” much of anything. In this particular American context, “nature”—willful or otherwise—will be subordinated to the prerogatives of the socially powerful.³³

Wilson’s ironic treatment of Frado’s naïve assessment of the domestic—but decisively social sphere—into which she has entered continues with her use of the word “relation.” Her choice signifies on at least two meanings of the term. First, the text intimates that while Frado might be unsophisticated in many ways, she is sufficiently

³³In terms of their temporal appearance in print, Frado, young Frederick before her, and young Linda after her discover their subordinate status as children-as-objects that can be circulated within various economies around the ages of 6 and 7, arguably an age of growing consciousness that should determine, their creators indicate, their recognition as social subjects. By emphasizing that the children have become aware of themselves as distinct people before or simultaneously with their social objectification, Wilson, Douglass and Jacobs strengthen their indictment of slavery and the systemic and dehumanizing exploitation of poor, black and/or enslaved children within indentured service. The children’s cognition of their social objectification, furthermore, coincides with their maternal loss, a narrative concurrence that identifies this dual loss as a kind of “social death,” in the terminology of Orlando Patterson. The narrative connections among Wilson’s, Jacobs’ and Douglass’ texts also emphasize the availability of a discursive construction of a denigrated—indeed lost—black childhood in the nineteenth century.

aware that most of her social interactions—the primary relations—with white people have been negative. She hopes now that she may receive more favorable treatment from the Bellmonts.

On another level, Frado's optimism about her unprecedented "relation" to the Bellmonts reveals her hopes for new affinities that might substitute for the loss of her mother. *Our Nig* emphasizes, however, that she has little to time sustain any illusion about her new "familial" identification because "Frado was called early in the morning by her new mistress" (29). Mrs. Bellmont, a middle-class white woman who zealously claims the advantages of her social position, has no interest in serving as a maternal surrogate for the black child. She wishes only to impose her own domestic "tyranny" in order to both secure the economic advantages of having an unpaid laborer at her family's disposal and to ensure Frado's quiescence to imposed racial subjugation.

In its representation of the white maternal figure as Frado's primary torturer, *Our Nig* challenges antebellum ideologies and material practices that celebrated white, middle-class women's virtues as they simultaneously denigrated black women. Scholars have asserted that the "cult of true womanhood" had as its central figure the white mother around which all else revolved. The cult of true womanhood, in turn, greatly influenced sentimental fiction, one of the primary literary genres with which *Our Nig* wrestles. According to Karen Halttunen, for example, the "model of sentimental womanhood" was "a faithful wife and devoted mother, a respected teacher of the young, a devout Christian whose piety was actively demonstrated in frequent acts of charity and a respectable woman of ... unblemished reputation." Conversely, "by the nineteenth century, black women and poor white women ...were increasingly portrayed as seductive, sexually

uncontrolled, and threatening to the social and moral order.”³⁴ Wilson’s construction of the white maternal figure as the most prominent agent of racial abuse and economic exploitation underscores her determination to interrogate the very assumptions about the interconnectedness of femininity and whiteness from which Frado, as both a child and mother, is excluded and, not insignificantly, from which Wilson’s own historical identity as a black woman and mother was also barred.

Mrs. Bellmont is no northern American “angel in the house.” Rather, she is a “she-devil” whose unbridled viciousness rivals that of any nineteenth-century characterization of a cruel southern slaveholder, male or female.³⁵ By emphasizing Mrs. Bellmont’s penchant for brutalizing Frado; for denying her spiritual instruction because “religion was not meant for niggers” (p. 68), the narrative effectively empties her

³⁴“Domestic Differences’: Competing Narratives of Womanhood in the Murder Trial of Lucretia Chapman in *The Culture of Sentiment*, p. 39-57. Again, in her article in the same volume, Isabelle Lehuu’s analysis of the emerging prominence of visual sentimentalism in the antebellum period centers on the fashion plates that were included in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the most popular monthly magazine for middle-class, white women. Lehuu notes that many of the engraved fashion plates were “tailored to the ideology of domesticity and motherhood” with titles like “A Domestic Scene,” “Maternal Instruction,” and “Infancy.” These visual tableaux represented white mothers and children in multiple settings of nurturing engagement.

³⁵For instance, she is reminiscent of Frederick Douglass’ mistress, Mrs. Auld. However, whereas Douglass emphasizes the *progression* of his mistress’ demonic descent in order to characterize the “dehumanizing effects of slavery,” Wilson naturalizes Mrs. B.’s northern, demonic racism. Readers learn of her “ugliness” along with her introductory naming as a “she-devil” and nothing in her subsequent characterization contradicts that initial portrayal (12). When Douglass introduces Sophia Auld she *is* the angel in the house whose “face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.” It is only after slaveownership has begun its “infernal work” that her “cheerful eye...eventually became red with rage...and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.” *Narrative*, p. 31.

character of the beauty³⁶ and propensity for nurture and spiritual elevation with which white, middle-class women were purportedly endowed. Perhaps no other depictions of Mrs. Bellmont challenge her “true womanliness” than the two scenes in which she literally stifles Frado’s ability to protest her abuse:

Angry that she should venture a reply to her command, she suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor. Excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion, she seemed left to unrestrained malice; and snatching a towel, stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly (82).

Mrs. Bellmont’s rage increases as she recognizes in Frado’s response the young girl’s fledgling attempt to resist her subjection, to challenge the authoritarian parameters of both the discursive and labor economies that her persecutor has established within the household.

In the second scene, Mrs. Bellmont, together with her daughter, Mary, violently silences Frado’s energetic verbal self-defense against Mary’s lies: “Mrs. B. and Mary commenced beating her inhumanly; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room, without any supper” (35). Because Frado insists on relating her own version of the struggle between herself and Mary (“I didn’t do it! I didn’t do it!”), Mrs. Bellmont concludes that any acceptance of Frado’s story negates Mary’s

³⁶If, as Lehuu argues, “[white] women’s pictorial representations shared in the construction of sentimentality and domestic femininity,” Wilson’s refusal to present Mrs. Bellmont’s physical attributes in great detail functions as part of her determination to undermine that construction. *Our Nig* does not provide its readers a “full picture” of Frado’s nemesis at all. Instead, it presents a disjointed figure whose “flashing eye” together with hands that continually make “angry gestures” and feet which deliver “kick after kick in quick succession and power” forcefully constitute a Manichean “vixen” who does not embody even a trace of sentimental femininity.

authority. “She came home with a lie; it made Mary’s story’s false” (Ibid). Frado’s rejection of Mary’s authority is no small matter, for if *Our Nig* establishes Mrs. Bellmont as the “she-devil,” it simultaneously portrays Mary as her first lieutenant within this hell, a portrayal which suggests that white women not only exert individual power but also construct and transmit an intergenerational hegemony in relation to their racial and socioeconomic subordinates. *Our Nig* dramatizes that, along with their oppression within a dominant white patriarchal system, black women must contend with a parallel, sometimes interlocking white matriarchal structure that negates cross-racial “sisterly” alliances.

Frado’s challenge and the Bellmont women’s response in this scene expose *Our Nig*’s recurring examination of the tension between discursive and material power, especially as they might be deployed by the subordinated. Mrs. Bellmont and Mary realize that Frado’s insistence on her own interpretive and relational authority indicates an emerging resistance to their domination. They move swiftly to forcefully suppress Frado’s protests in order to reestablish her objectification by ensuring that she remains silent, “shut up,” and prostrate. Mrs. Bellmont’s vow to “cure [Frado] of her tale bearing” by “placing the wedge of wood between her teeth” strikingly emphasizes both her conviction that Frado’s increasingly vocal contestation poses a threat to her supremacy and her willingness to use any available weapon to ensure Frado’s continued powerlessness (52).

Our Nig reinforces the black girl’s objectification and the white women’s desire for domination by producing a repertoire of sexualized imagery that frames these power struggles as scenes of symbolic rape. Both using and reconfiguring the familiar

abolitionist allusion—though no less horrific for its familiarity—to the sexual abuse of black women, Wilson’s narrative replaces the white male figure conventionally associated with such institutionalized sexual terror with the figures of two white women, wielding the “piece of wood,” a symbol of the phallic power they have appropriated. By encoding the physical assaults as symbolic spectacles of phallic torture in which two generations of white women consolidate their discursive and material power, Wilson inaugurates an inscription of the northern white domestic sphere as one of the primary spaces within which multiple hierarchical struggles between black and white women take place. Twentieth-century African American women writers, including Georgia Douglas Johnson, Ann Petry, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison, among others, extend this symbolic examination of the domestic realm as a politicized terrain on which ideological, discursive, and material interracial, intragender relations are contested.

But what if these scenes are not only metaphoric scenes of rape but actual ones as well? What if the piece of wood is not only a symbol of phallic power (with its primary referent a male figure) but also the literal weapon of violation that one woman uses to sexually abuse another person of her sex? What kind of terrifying poetics of white female power and black female disempowerment does *Our Nig* implore us to recognize but which critics have been reluctant to acknowledge? Reluctant to acknowledge, I suspect, because of its sheer frightfulness: critics fail to decode certain stories because they continue to believe that literary texts from past historical periods would not broach *those* subjects, that scholars overreach critical boundaries with their own contemporary understandings of sexually abusive relationships, and--last but by no means least—that we risk the opening of a literary, historical, and critical Pandora’s box of horrors when,

alongside the familiar figure of the white male rapist of black women, we recognize also the white female sexual abuser of (here) a black girl.³⁷ And, yet, that is precisely one of the “sketches” Wilson draws and one that constitutes one of the “transactions in [her]

³⁷My analysis here has been enabled by Ronna C. Johnson’s article, “Said But Not Spoken: Elision and the Representation of Rape, Race and Gender in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig. Speaking the Other Self: American Women Writers*. ed. Jeanne Campbell Reesman (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 96-113. Building upon the groundwork laid by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hazel Carby and Claudia Tate, who have all noted the discomfiting sexual subtexts and elisions in Wilson’s narrative, Johnson convincingly argues that “these elisions reserve discursive space for the only abuse that is not explicitly represented in the narrative: sexual exploitation.” And to uncover such exploitation, Johnson continues, her “reading foregrounds gender” which enables the revelation of the text’s “allusion to slavery” and its inscription of a “northern exploitation of Frado equivalent to that of the plantation and the sexual significance of that equivalence for the black female.” By highlighting “gender,” then, and thus relying on the familiar narrative of sexual violence against southern enslaved black women, Johnson recognizes only *Our Nig*’s “coding [of] white male sexual violence against the black female protagonist.” So although Johnson does not equivocate in her denunciation of Mrs. Belmont, assuring readers that “I appreciate and in no way intend to diminish or mitigate the text’s depiction of white middle-class female brutality in the abuse meted out to Frado by Mrs. Belmont and Mary,” she attributes “racial exploitation” to “white female agency and responsibility.” She warns us further not to “repea[t] the silencing of women which sexual violence at least in part aims to achieve” by “preserv[ing] the immunity of white male sexual privilege” if we ignore the Belmont men’s sexual abuse of Frado. Johnson’s paradigm of gender allows only for a space in which white women engage in racial exploitation and white men engage in sexual exploitation against black women. However, a foregrounding of the ways in which racial power complicates gendered relations might enable a more complex and less familiar comprehension of the coding of sexual violence against black women and “girls. As an adult, white, middle-class woman, Mrs. Belmont has the “privilege” to violate Frado in any way that she chooses, including sexually. So while I agree with Johnson’s conclusion that “the transgressive subtext of *Our Nig* suggests that the Belmont men do not view Frado in any significantly different way than does Mrs. Belmont,” I go further to assert that we only fully understand “Wilson’s indirection with regard to sexuality” when we recognize and name Wilson’s encoding of both white male and white female sexual violence against the black girl. P. Gabrielle Foreman also concludes that Wilson’s negotiation of the “nineteenth-century unutterable—that space of sexuality” requires “readers to recover” the “contexts and codes” of that negotiation. She, too, however, understands Mrs. Belmont’s brutality only as an asexual corollary to the southern white male’s sexual violence. “The Spoken and the Silenced in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig* in *Callaloo*, 13, 2 (Spring, 1990), p. 313-24.

life” she reveals through metaphoric coding and displacement. Gayl Jones also explores interracial, intragender rape within the context of slavery—albeit briefly—in *Corregidora* (1976) which I discuss in the following chapter.³⁸

In this instance, it is not so much that Wilson has “purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home” (Preface) as that she uses narrative deflection to encode an apparently unprecedented representation of interracial and intragender sexual abuse, subversively doing so through the depiction of the corrupted white maternal figure. One cannot doubt that Wilson knew only too well that had she made this subtextual story explicit, the nineteenth-century “public” whose patronage she sought would have been “universally” hostile. But, presumably, as her latter-day readers, we can strive to uncover her full story without fear or hostility (Preface).

³⁸In an underanalyzed section of Jacobs’ *Incidents*, Brent intimates that at least some slaveholders engaged in homosexual sexual violence. In her penultimate chapter, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” Brent recounts one of her “Southern reminiscences,” a story about a male slave, Luke, and his “bed-ridden master.” This “tyrant” whose “excessive dissipation” left him a “mere degraded wreck of manhood...took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled from the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bedside of this cruel and disgusting wretch.” *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 192. In its examination of the entrenched violence against slaves, Jacobs’ text employs such euphemisms only during its representations of sexual violence. Its allusion to the “strangest freaks” accords with the not-so-oblique Victorian characterization of homosexual sex—consensual or coerced. This passage, then, informs readers that at least some male slaves also were subjected to the sexual despotism of their masters and that critics and cultural historians must revise heteronormative paradigms in order to fully comprehend the sexually violent conditions that undergirded enslavement and white supremacy.

Unequivocal about the absolute power Mrs. Bellmont exercises over Frado, *Our Nig* insists that the white woman “felt that [the black girl’s] time and person belonged solely to her. She was under her in every sense of the word” (24). In its emphasis on Mrs. Bellmont’s possessive control of Frado, the text stresses the excessiveness of the white woman’s character (“excited by so much indulgence of a dangerous passion”; “unrestrained malice”; “fiery,” and “inhumanly”), an intemperance that can be interpreted conventionally as “unfeminine” anger but that also can be understood as the narrative’s inscription of perverse sexuality. *Our Nig* reinforces this sexual association with Mrs. Bellmont in its repeated deployment of a literary image that long has been recognized as a metaphor for sexual abuse and rape, the enforced cropping of female hair. In the first of these denudings, the narrator reveals that “Mrs. B. had shaved [Frado’s] glossy ringlets” (68). Shortly after, responding to Jack’s query, “‘where are your curls, Fra?’ the young girl answers, “‘Your mother cut them off’” (70).³⁹ Further still, the text uses “cut” to connect its use of this code of sexual violation to another, the image of a woman’s slit tongue and the silencing that image also represents: “The first time she was left alone with Nig, she gave her a thorough beating...; and threatened, if she ever exposed her to James, she would ‘cut her tongue out’” (72).

Having thus framed Mrs. Bellmont’s assaults within metaphoric significations of sexual violence, *Our Nig* amplifies their meaning in those scenes where the white woman

³⁹Johnson, too, pays attention to the “sexual overtones” of Frado’s shorn hair but interprets it only as another instance of the Bellmont men’s “intrusive attention to Frado’s body.” Again, I do not reject the legitimacy of such a reading but wish to introduce another interpretation that recognizes the emphatic connection *Our Nig* makes between such sexual overtones and Mrs. Bellmont (“Said But Not Spoken, p. 111).

chooses pieces of wood as her “instrument[s] of torture” (94).⁴⁰ On the two occasions when Mrs. Bellmont attacks Frado with wood, the text explicitly inscribes oral violation—“then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room” (35); “placing the wedge of wood between her teeth, she beat her cruelly with the raw-hide” to ‘cure her of tale-bearing’” (93). Wilson structures these scenes of oral violation to both represent and displace her inscriptions of vaginal rape, replacing one orifice with another. Although the author repudiated her society’s constraints on “tale-bearing” by writing explicitly about some forms of physical torture, she perhaps anticipated that her contemporaries would not countenance similar disclosures about intragender sexual abuse, especially ones that implicated white, middle-class women. Relatedly, then, Wilson could not directly address the after-effects—the post-traumatic symptoms—of such abuse. Yet *Our Nig* offers a suggestive inscription of post-traumatic symptoms when it reveals that after years of indentured servitude not only Frado’s “body was in pain” (123) but that, emotionally, “she was once more alone in the darkness which enveloped her previous days” (120).

Frado’s movement from indentured servant to underpaid laborer within the New England market economy consolidates *Our Nig*’s inaugural discourse of a northern black womanhood/motherhood that emerges as a direct legacy of both the socioeconomic structure of slavery and the concomitant econoracial subordination of African Americans in both the antebellum and postbellum North. After systematically exploiting Frado for

⁴⁰Wilson subverts sentimental literature’s conventional use of firewood to symbolize the creation of warmth in the “hearth” of the home by transforming it into a weapon of violation, thereby attesting to her manipulation and rejection of sentimentalism. But the particular form of abusive violation that this symbol of sentimental domesticity takes has, dare I say, more significant concerns than generic deformation.

twelve years as her indentured servant, Mrs. Bellmont releases her with the “assurance that she would soon wish herself back again” and “a present of a silver half dollar” (117). Mrs Belmont imitates her slaveholding counterparts who sought to convince potential runaways and those who had self-manumitted that they would return to the “comforts” of enslavement after enduring the harshness of freedom. But like *her* own enslaved counterparts, “Frado replied hat she had had enough of such comforts” and though she “wonder[ed] if she *could* succeed in providing for her own wants...she resolved to try” (116). “Alone in the world,” Frado questions her chances for success since her years of exploitation had left her physically diminished (“lame”), with “failing health...no kindly human hand could dissipate” and a “wounded spirit.” She remains desperately undereducated and economically destitute as well. With so few resources how, indeed, could “*she*, black, feeble and poor” (124) create a viable livelihood for herself and, later, herself and son? The latter pages of *Our Nig* underscore both the private and public constraints that impede Frado’s attempts at social and economic independence as well as maternal preservation.

Frado’s itinerant participation in the private labor market, primarily as a domestic servant,⁴¹ and her obligatory dependence on public, institutional charity—along with the denunciations that accompany this support—anticipates twentieth-century literary and historical narratives that seek to recognize and validate as well as undermine black

⁴¹While focusing primarily on former slaves in the South, Jacqueline Jones’s historical analysis of nineteenth-century black women’s work offers insight into the kinds of labor that were available to black women in the north as well. She explains, “urban black women had to rely almost exclusively on wage-labor in order to provide for their families...Most of these women—girls and married, separated, or widowed mothers—toiled either as domestic servants or laundresses.” *Labor of Love*, p. 127.

women's subjectivity. Without necessarily making any claims for an unbroken or uncomplicated line of literary inheritance, one recognizes that Wilson's Frado prefigures such protagonists as Jacobs' Linda Brent, Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson, Toni Morrison's Pauline Breedlove and Mavis, and Gayl Jones' Cat. Importantly, too, Wilson's characterization of the disdain Frado encounters when she must resort to public assistance anticipates Daniel Moynihan's "Black Matriarch" and Ronald Reagan's "welfare queen."

Remarkably, given the novelty of receiving compensation for her labor and having explicitly emphasized the nominal remuneration of fifty cents that she receives from Mrs. Bellmont, one wonders that *Our Nig* never specifies the wages Frado earns from her employers. Perhaps Wilson wishes to emphasize the dignity of Frado's work and the relative independence that accompanies it in this section. Yet monetary specificity need not diminish such representation of pride. It seems quite possible, therefore, that *Our Nig*'s silence about Frado's wages intimates that she was paid little or no money for her work, possibly constrained to bartering her labor in exchange for shelter and clothing. Though inevitably speculative, my hypothesis derives from Wilson's economically neutral language: "Frado engaged to work for a family a mile distant" (117); "the clergyman...was now seeking some one to watch his sick children, and as soon as he heard of her recovery, again asked for her services" (121). Whether provided for money or traded for provisions and a place of residence, the arduous domestic work she must perform debilitates her. Unable to continue this work, she must resort to "one only resource; the public must pay the expense so she was removed to the home of two maidens, (old) who had principle enough to earn the money a charitable

public disburses.... Two years had these maidens watched and cared for her, and they began to weary, and finally to request the authorities to remove her” (122).

Within the space of a few pages, Wilson “sketches” a paradigmatic portrait of a black woman who attempts to create a life of financial autonomy despite many years of structural economic exploitation and physical abuse. Forced to rely on nineteenth-century forms of prototypical welfare or “poor relief,” she is later denounced as a fraudulent abuser of the public’s largess. When the derisively named Mrs. Hoggs, “a lover of gold and silver,” realizes that Frado’s physical incapacitation is not absolute because the young woman uses her hands to sew although “her body was in pain,” Mrs. Hoggs reports her to the physician and town officials as an impostor who was, “in truth, able to get up and go to work” (123). For the remainder of *Our Nig*, Frado never secures anything beyond marginal economic subsistence. When her health permits, she works. When unable to do so, she relies on private charity or public assistance.

In her engaging analysis of the “controlling image” of the “welfare queen” that emerged in the late twentieth century, political scientist and cultural critic Ange-Marie Hancock argues that the deployment of that contemporary appellation in order to both identify and humiliate black women recipients of public monetary benefits was particularly effective because the “public identity of the ‘welfare queen’...is grounded in two discursive themes about Black women traceable to slavery: their laziness and their fecundity.”⁴² *Our Nig* consistently confronts such mid-nineteenth-century discursive practices which attempted to define both enslaved and free black women. Dominant

⁴²*The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), p. 6.

conceptions of blackness that were circulated in order to justify racial enslavement were appropriated and extended in order to legitimize black women's racial and economic exploitation in both the North and South. Although Mrs. Hoggs cannot deride Frado for her fecundity because, at this point, the latter has no children, she relies on assumptions of black women's purported laziness in order to denounce her as a fraudulent drain on the public's resources.

When Frado does become pregnant, her marginal economic existence and her husband's desertion make it impossible for her to experience her impending motherhood as anything other than a "horrific" intrusion:

...Once more alone! Yet not alone. A Still newer companionship would soon force itself upon her. No one wanted her with such prospects. Herself was burden enough; who would have an additional one?

The horrors of her condition nearly prostrated her, and she was again thrown upon the public for subsistence. Then followed the birth of the child (128).

Pregnancy without financial resources and communal support, not the pain of parturition itself, holds unreserved terror for Frado. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the child's birth almost comes as an afterthought in the wake of her return to dependency. The narrative's stark language leaves no doubt about what maternity could mean for a poor, black woman and reminds its readers that mid-nineteenth-century idealizations of motherhood had relevance for white, middle-class women—when such conceptualizations had any relevance at all. In doing so, *Our Nig* alerts its twentieth and

twenty-first century readers that subsequent—but related—paradigms of motherhood also have been tied inextricably to the econoracial status of women-as-mothers.

Proponents of the “maternalist” discourse of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, for example, who demanded that “‘mothers of the race’ needed to comport themselves appropriately to raise proper nineteenth-century male Americans,” did not include nonwhite women.⁴³ “Maternalism” had as its target “white Protestant widows and southern European immigrant mothers.” The latter’s adherence to the maternalist prescriptions represented to some degree their attempt to ensure their initiation and inclusion into American whiteness and cultural citizenship, a rite of passage in which black women, of course, could not participate. Similarly, it is important to recognize that the late twentieth-century deployment of the “welfare queen” who did not deserve the “luxury” of staying at home with her children occurred at the same historical moment as the conservative backlash against middle-class, white women who sought paid employment—and thus economic independence—outside the home. Assumptions about gender, class, and race always inform which maternal populations are included and excluded from prevailing ideologies of motherhood. *Our Nig*’s emphasis on connecting Frado’s view of her pregnancy and parturition to her poverty and marital desertion compels this recognition.

The text’s attention to Frado’s emotional experience of her pregnancy also reveals an emergent discourse that registers anxiety about reproductive autonomy and its relation to black women’s expressive sexuality. Although *Our Nig* explicitly connects the “horror” of Frado’s pregnancy to her socioeconomic status, these passages also suggest a

⁴³Ibid., p. 12.

subtextual interrogation of the conditions of sexuality that make it difficult—if not impossible—for Frado to determine when and if she would become a mother. In other words, Frado has no access to contraceptives or, as importantly, no familial or communal connections to which she could turn for the knowledge of such resources. If only in a muted discourse, Wilson intimates that marriage or, rather, sexual relations within marriage, need not be equated with motherhood. And yet it often was, as it is for her protagonist. Frado's experience of her impending motherhood as an intrusive assault—"a still new companionship would soon force itself upon her"—against which she has no defense enables Wilson to initiate a literary exploration of the relationship between sexuality and procreative autonomy simultaneously with an examination of socioeconomic subordination. Here, too, she inaugurates a discourse that authors as varied as Nella Larsen, Mary Burrill, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones and, recently, Ayana Mathis, among others, will develop in forceful ways throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

In its final passages, *Our Nig*'s movement from Frado's enforced maternity to a wholly absent one consolidates the discourse of black maternal absence with which Wilson begins. Required to work after her husband's death, Frado determines that separation from her son will afford her the best opportunity for economic independence, once again repeating her own maternal legacy but also taking that repetition a step further.⁴⁴ "As soon as her babe could be nourished without his mother, she left him in charge of a Mrs. Capon" (129). After she relinquishes her son to what we would now

⁴⁴"Further" because when Mag, Frado's mother, deserts her, she severs all ties with Frado but takes along Frado's younger sister. Frado herself has one child only so her separation from him is even more definitive in terms of the (de)construction of her maternal identity.

call “foster care,” Frado’s departure indeed improves her circumstances and “nothing turns her from her steadfast purpose of elevating herself” (130). Her story concludes without any further mention of her son or her maternal identity.

But does it? *Frado*’s maternal narrative does end, yet *Our Nig*’s inscription of a northern antebellum black maternal discourse does not. Wilson’s inclusion of the “Appendix” essentially functions as a coda or afterword that not only reinforces the text’s often slippery conflation of its author and protagonist; the “Appendix” also heightens the maternal narrative that precedes it, emphasizing, as I argued earlier, Wilson’s own motherlessness and her acceptance as a foster child by “her mother Walker” (134) as well as providing a significantly more complicated account of Wilson’s relationship with her son than the representation of Frado’s with her son would seem to indicate. One could argue that such discursive maternal differentiation indicates Wilson’s own reticence against entirely conflating her identity with her protagonist’s. That is, her insistence on her creative output, though autobiographical, maintains some distinction from her historical, authorial self. The text’s own multiple and slippery figurations, along with its structure, invite critical recognition that Frado can and does stand on her own as a fictional character—even as she also stands in for Wilson, her creator. Consequently, the “Appendix” functions as an elaboration of Frado’s story even as it foregrounds Wilson’s.

What is particularly striking for my purposes of comprehending the maternal poetics that *Our Nig* inscribes is that this heightened discourse continues not in Wilson’s or her fictional narrator’s voice but rather in the voices of others, two of whom remain, essentially, anonymous. The afterwords of those others function very much like the authenticating documents included in slave narratives in order to legitimize both the

historical identity of the ex-slave-author and his or her story as well as to testify to the intellectual capability of said author. Wilson's supporters, too, verify her existence and "the truth of her assertions" (138), further conflating her identity with Frado's. Their relatively short testimonies also embellish the text's maternal narrative. Indeed, the "extratextual" delineation of the black maternal relationship that "Margaret Thorn," especially, provides presents a more harrowing picture of Wilson's separation from her son than *Our Nig* does in its representation of Frado and her child. Whereas the narrator of *Our Nig* relates the child's consignment to foster care in language that suggests some agency—though, of course, circumscribed by economic necessity—on Frado's part: "she left him in charge...and procured an agency hoping to recruit her health and gain an easier livelihood... (129), Thorn announces that, initially, Wilson has no choice in her son's removal:

In her sickness he has been taken from her, and sent to the county farm, because she could not pay his board every week; but as soon as she was able, she took him from that *place*, and now he has a home where he is considered as good as those he is with. He is an intelligent, smart boy, and no doubt will make a smart man, if he is rightly managed (139).

After securing employment and moving from a state of destitution to subsistence, the best Wilson can effect is the transfer of her son from the dreaded public foster care ("that *place*") to a private foster home where she and he are very well regarded, "beloved" by all, but where, nonetheless, his "management" arises as a concern and she remains a guest: "they are always happy to have her visit them whenever she will" (Ibid). *Our Nig*

emphasizes that separation and loss define black maternal identity and the mother-child relationship.

By relying on her supporters⁴⁵ to extend and authenticate the maternal discourse she delineates, Wilson highlights the challenges she faces in her discursive intervention into antebellum maternal ideologies and narratives. As a former indentured servant⁴⁶ whose maternity follows the period of her servitude and who, therefore, cannot uncomplicatedly deploy the familiar and authorized tropes of enslaved maternity nor the unavailable narrative devices for constructing an impoverished, black northern womanhood, Wilson must navigate the potentially treacherous pathway to a new textual maternity. Why treacherous? First, Wilson must manage this new maternal textualization without implicating or inscribing herself as a “bad” mother. Second, she must do so without characterizing her son as an irredeemable burden on the county’s resources or, equally dangerous, a fraud like his father.⁴⁷ In essence, Wilson must substantiate her text’s claim to its inauguration of a northern, black maternal narrative by employing the authenticating and authoritative voices of the “Appendix” in order to authorize this emergent black maternal discursive space. Those voices articulate the

⁴⁵In another testimonial, vis-à-vis the slave narratives, “Allida,” like Thorn, confirms the child’s foster-care placement.

⁴⁶Her supporter, Margaret Thorn, begs to differ with this identification and asserts that she was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word; and a lonely one, too” (p. 139).

⁴⁷While my focus here lies in *Our Nig*’s maternal narrative, I am intrigued also by the ways in which Samuel’s (and that of his historical counterpart, Thomas Wilson’s) brief characterization prefigures a post-nineteenth-century discourse of the financially useless and absent black father. Although Samuel is denounced as a fraud and a deserter, *Our Nig* acknowledges that he “was kind to [Frado] when at home” and that he provided economic support when he had the means. Similarly, “Allida” asserts that Wilson’s “faithless husband...supported her and his little son decently well” when not away. *Our Nig*’s ambivalence about the black paternal figure (also represented by Jim and Seth) invites further exploration.

purportedly candid accounts that she, Wilson—black woman, mother, author—cannot enunciate without risking severe denunciation. And yet...the until recently—and still indefinitely—deliberate anonymity of the “Appendix”’s three authors (“Allida,” “Margaret Thorn,” and “C.D.S.”) indicates that although Wilson was entirely cognizant of the contemporary constraints on her discursive practices, she was determined that only she, Harriet E. Wilson, would be the acknowledged author of these new sketches of black maternity.

CHAPTER 2

Incestuous Origins and Maternal Subjectivity in *Corregidora*

As is often the case, it begins with slavery. In her 1861 autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Harriet Jacobs opens up a discursive terrain upon which the trauma of incestuous sexual abuse could be confronted and examined. In one of her sermonizing passages that admonishes the white American missionaries who would “save” the “savages of Africa,” Jacobs’ surrogate narrator, Linda Brent, commands them not to “overlook the dark corners at home” in which slaveholders indulge in some of their worse transgressions: “Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters.”⁴⁸ With this directive, Jacobs

⁴⁸Ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 73. Jacobs’ critique of the hypocritical proselytizing of white missionaries abroad even as they avert their attention away from racial and sexual oppression in the United States anticipates, among others, W. E. B. Du Bois’ call for racial equality during World War I and the many-voiced African-American demands that the United States’ fight against fascism overseas during World War II should be accompanied by the elimination of racism at “home.” Martin Luther King, Jr.’s criticisms of the United States’ policies in South East Asia along with his simultaneous and—to engage in understatement—more acknowledged denunciations of domestic racial terrorism also echo Jacobs’ injunction. Broadening the geographical terrain from the United States to a larger “West” against which this charge of racial hypocrisy can be brought, James Baldwin, in his 1953 essay, “Stranger in the Village,” recalled his profound discomfort when the Swedish villagers among whom he lived for a time “beamed with pleasure” when they informed him of their “custom” of “‘buying’ African natives for the purpose of converting them to Christianity.” This they would do while they treated him as, first, an exotic “living wonder,” or later with “peculiar, intent, paranoiac malevolence.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 1670-79.

inscribes incestuous rape into the discursive and literary register of sexual violence against African American women, accentuating the connection between this particular form of violence and ruptured familial bonds. At the same time, by connecting that paternal, sexual violation of one's "own flesh" to another, the paternal selling of one's "own flesh," with the slight grammatical link of a comma, Jacobs encodes the slaveholders' construction of slavery as a "patriarchal" institution that gave them full ownership and (ab)use of all bodies—the chattel personal—within that system. But Jacobs' language, with all of its biblical intonations, forcefully rejects such license, insisting that the slaveholders' immoral and licentious corruption of patriarchal prerogatives lacks biblical authority—even if it enjoys antebellum legal and social approbation. Of course, in repudiating the slaveholders' claim to biblical imprimatur, she emphasizes the illegitimacy of the laws and social codes, whose advocates often claimed religious sanction.

The sexually violent conditions of slavery that Jacobs uncovers in her narrative produced a legacy with which Gayl Jones contends in her 1975 novel *Corregidora*.⁴⁹ Whereas Jacobs' abolitionist text quickly moves away from the incendiary topic of white paternal incest, Jones' post-Civil Rights, emergent-Womanist interrogation of the consequences of that legacy positions black maternal identity and relations at the center of the trauma of sexual abuse. Here, I define "sexual abuse" as exploitative sexual and sexualized relations between two or more people where one uses the power that derives from his or her gender, race, age, class, or familial position (and any intersection thereof)

⁴⁹First published by Random House, *Corregidora* was reissued by Beacon Press in 1986. All citations refer to the latter publication.

to sexually dominate another whose own subordinate social standing increases her or his vulnerability to such aggression. I am primarily concerned with *Corregidora*'s inscription of incest and its associated discourses of familial trauma and communal rupture as an important symbolic site on which configurations of black maternal identity and relations could be engendered.

Thus centralized, the novel's maternal characters emerge as both immediate agents and/or complicit, if unwitting, participants in the violations of their own maternal identities and their own maternal relations. Jones' narrative strategy enables an examination of black maternal subjectivity—which the text identifies as a crucial component of black womanhood—as a problematized site of familial and social identities. In other words, *Corregidora* situates its exploration of incest and sexual abuse within a black maternal discourse. Yet, significantly and simultaneously, it locates its interrogation of incestuous *and* familial discourses within social and institutional discursive and material regimes of gender, race, class, and sexuality, effectively problematizing any effort to understand the traumatizing sexual behavior and its symptomatic consequences as instances of individual pathology which can be divorced from systemic subordination and exploitation. Jones' configurations insist not only upon psychologically individualized interpretations of sexual abuse. They also engage socio-historical interrogations that identify first slavery and, second, slavery's succeeding institutions of racial-sexual terror as constitutive systems of sexual trauma and abuse that shape both black female subjectivity and black maternity. *Corregidora* attends to these originary moments of white men's legally and socially authorized violation of black

women's sexual boundaries in order to explicate their consequences for black women-as-mothers, their offspring and their communities.

Jones' inscription—along with those by other African American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Sapphire—of a connection between black maternal characters and incestuous sexual abuse as a figurative space on which to explore African American subjectivities demands a critical inquiry that attempts to understand *why* her text has engaged this disturbing narrative focus. What literary, discursive, historical, and cultural conceptualizations of black maternity have enabled, indeed authorized, the exploration of this connection? How would the narrative negotiate the potential volatility that accompanies configurations of black maternal subjectivity manifested in thematics of incest and sexual abuse without participating in and expanding the discursive practices of black maternal denigration that so frequently inform discussions of black motherhood?

Building upon a feminist-historicist theoretical framework that consistently and insistently intersects with African American literary and cultural criticism, this chapter seeks to explore the questions I have articulated above, theorizing that *Corregidora* examines the ways in which black women's inheritance of a history of sexual abuse together with their experience of successive structures of sexual and other forms of exploitation profoundly shape their maternal identities and structure their relations with their children. Having had their own identities formed by such institutional structures of sexual trauma and exploitation, the narrative's profoundly disabled maternal figures—emotionally, economically, culturally—cannot create and sustain nurturing spaces and healthy relationships within the texts' own conceptualizations of “nurture.” As a

consequence, their relationships with their children are unstable and imperiled, a condition of relational disruption that increases the children's vulnerabilities within familial and social spheres. When, in their turn, the children are not empowered to critically understand and resist their own subjugation within those spaces—sometimes acquiescing to such powerlessness, other times adopting and participating in dominating practices—recurring patterns of familial and communal violations mitigate against the creation of empowered African American subjectivities as well as the recuperation and development of valued and vital black cultural economies. Thus incestuous sexual abuse emerges as an ideologically potent narrative strategy and metaphor to explore the intergenerational formation and deformation of black maternal subjectivity as well as the ways in which such (de)formations violate black women, their families, and communities. Given their entrenchment, such violations are not easily contested, nor is the question of a viable black maternal subjectivity easily resolved by Jones' narrative. Yet *Corregidora* seems to assert that the potential of creating and sustaining healthy and empowered black maternal identities can emerge from the last daughter's re-creation of the history of sexual trauma into symbolic iterations that transfigure the inheritance of violence, guilt, shame and betrayal, potentially transforming this legacy into a source of generative instances of creative expressivity. Such transformative creativity disrupts and rejects the painfully violent terms of black women's maternal legacy. Significantly, however, *Corregidora* refuses to present the protagonist's transformation as complete or uncomplicatedly triumphant, insisting, I argue, that such a legacy cannot be managed and contained easily by even one of the most powerfully rendered symbolic expressions of black women's creativity, Blues singing. Jones suggests that the continued modes of

sexual violation and exploitation that often constitute the representational protocols and material conditions that inform black women's lives render triumphant resolutions impossible, perhaps even undesirable.

In a five-part retrospective narrative, Ursa Corregidora attempts to understand the circumstances surrounding her sexual relationships and failed marriages to first, Mutt Thomas and, later, Tadpole McCormick during the late 1940s. A Blues singer, Ursa divorces Mutt after a physical struggle—sparked by his possessively jealous determination to end her nightclub performances—results in a serious fall. Ursa suffers a miscarriage, after which her physician recommends a hysterectomy. The removal of her uterus, of course, makes it impossible for her to fulfill the maternal imperative to “make generations” which she has received her entire life. Ursa realizes that she cannot comply with the procreative mandate that her maternal predecessors have enacted in order to (re)produce corporeal “evidence,” children, that could counter the white cultural denial of black women's sexual exploitation. And as she realizes further that the maternal mandate and the legacy of sexual exploitation she has inherited have shaped her, specifically her sexuality and her relations with black men—who themselves are other heirs to this collective inheritance—she begins to question her generation's ability to create a relationship to this oppressive history which neither accepts nor merely inverts the terms that slavery and racial supremacy established for a black maternal subjectivity. *Corregidora* posits Ursa's singing of the Blues, her repetitive oral performance of a culturally black creative expressivity, as a potentially empowering intervention into that maternal construction. Yet, given the ambivalence with which Jones' narrative depicts the maternal figures both inside and outside Ursa's family, together with its configuration

of the sexual economies which shape them and in which they participate, the novel suggests that such necessary and even powerful interventions are, at best, limited modes of contestation in the twentieth-century terrain on which black women's sexuality and maternal identities are (de)formed.

Corregidora stands out conspicuously in its imagination of black maternity as an historical American identity that must be comprehended beyond the geo-political boundaries of the United States. Thus many years before Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*⁵⁰ underscored the significance of understanding black modern identities within the larger Atlantic sphere of the multiple points at which the captive Africans who survived the notorious Middle Passage disembarked as well as the numerous forced and voluntary migrations of their descendants after the original passages, Jones' novel—coming in the wake of the U.S.-based Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements as well as the coeval international, anti-colonialist insurgencies—developed a black maternal story whose transnational formation and movement emphasize that it has been “branded with the new world” (59).⁵¹ While 1960s and 1970s Black Power discourses within the United States often emphasized African Americans' connection to black people's revolutionary activism in the former European colonies in Africa and in the former colonized *and* enslaved spheres in the Americas, Jones was to my knowledge one of the few contemporary black American writers who explicitly and expansively

⁵⁰*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁵¹Portugal lost its final stranglehold on the African continent when Angola, its last colony there, won its independence in 1975. Interestingly, Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* emphasizes Catholic Portugal's seminal role in the development of New World slavery as well. Morrison, however, focuses on the embryonic phases of slavery's genesis in the geographic terrain that would become the United States' slave territory.

complicated African American subjectivity by incorporating territories outside of the United States in her writing.

While Ursa was born in Kentucky and her mother in Louisiana, both her grandmother and great-grandmother were the slaves of Corregidora, a Portuguese slaveowner in Brazil.⁵² Jones' inaugural narrative setting carries deliberate historical and ideological resonance given Portugal's seminal and extensive role in the modern slave trade and Brazil's dubious distinction as the country into which the largest number of captive Africans were brought.⁵³ Brazil, too, was the last nation in the Black Atlantic to legally emancipate its enslaved populations in 1888, following a period of "gradual" manumission that began with the 1871 passage of the improbably named "Law of the Free Womb." Jones' situation of her maternal narrative within this historical context symbolically characterizes her "new world" story of sexual abuse, incest and black maternal degradation as both centuries-old and too-painfully-recent. Great Gram, "the darkest woman in the house, the coffee-bean woman" who was taken "out of the field when she was still a child and put ...to work in [Corregidora's] whorehouse while still a child" instructs her daughters (10-11): "naw, he wasn't the first that did it. There was

⁵²As Herman Beavers has pointed out to me, Jones' development of Ursa's maternal family's geographical movement posits another conception of the Southern migration narrative. Ursa's maternal "roots" are "South of the South," a narrative move rarely seen outside Caribbean writing.

⁵³Historians' estimates vary but they generally agree that between the 1520s-1850s, 3.5-4.5 million Africans survived the Middle Passage before their enslavement in Brazil. According to Katia M. de Queirós Mattoso, this calculation accounts for "38 percent of all slaves brought from Africa to the New World." *To Be a Slave in Brazil, 1550-1888*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p. 41. See also, Dale Torston Graden, *From Slavery to Freedom in Brazil, Bahia, 1835-1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006) and David Baronov, *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil, The 'Liberation' of Africans Through the Emancipation of Capital* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000).

plenty that did it” (23). Reflecting on her racial-sexual legacy, Ursa, the great-granddaughter, ponders that her “veins are centuries meeting,” and wonders “how many generations have been subjected to this abuse?” (46)

The hierarchical arrangement of power that characterizes the multi-generational, incestuous sexual abuse begins with Great Gram. Although she was not Corregidora’s biological daughter, “she was a child” who did not grow “no more than five feet” (23), a striking contrast to Corregidora who was a “big strapping man” (11) when he routinely began to rape her. Great Gram’s figuration as a victim of incestuous abuse is consolidated further by her revelation that not only Corregidora but also his Portuguese wife, “a skinny stuck-up little woman he got over in Lisbon” (13), sexually abused her for five years, from the age of thirteen to eighteen. Great Gram recalls that the wife begins this sexual abuse because “[Corregidora] wouldn’t sleep with her, so she made me sleep with her, so for five years I was sleeping with her and him” (13).⁵⁴ Within this

⁵⁴Jones’ explicit inscription of a white mistress’ sexual abuse of her female slave revises both Harriet Wilson’s and Harriet Jacobs’ cryptic but sexually suggestive representations of mistress-slave relations. As I argued in the first chapter, Wilson’s depictions of Mrs. Belmont’s assaults on Frado in *Our Nig* encodes that abuse as symbolic rape when, for example, Mrs. Belmont “propp[ed] [Frado’s] mouth open with a piece of wood.” (*Our Nig*, 35.) In Jacobs’ narrative, Linda Brent recalls that after Mrs. Flint learns of her husband’s plans to sexually subdue the young slave girl, she “took me to sleep in a room adjoining her own.... Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me....” (*Incidents*, 34). As a parenthetical aside in her 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense J. Spillers notes *Corregidora*’s fictional reworking of the “historic motif of entangled female sexualities” that constitutes this scene in Jacobs’ 1861 autobiography. Although Spillers recognizes the reverberations between Jacobs’ and Jones’ texts, her chief concern lies with explicating Jacobs’ and, as a consequence, she focuses on the “psychoanalytic” and “metaphoric” potential embedded in Jacobs’s richly-layered depiction of Mrs. Flint’s “veiled seduction” of Linda. I have no disagreement with Spillers’ incisive analysis of *Incidents*. In juxtaposing *Incidents* and *Corregidora*, I do wish us to acknowledge further, however,

plantation economy, then, white slaveholders, men and women both, establish a system of exchange in which black girls and women constitute the currency that can be circulated and substituted in order to satisfy whatever libidinal and economic desires their masters and mistresses entertain. Just as Corregidora removes the child from the production of coffee and transforms her into the “coffee-bean” colored reproducer of slaves as well as the producer of sexual pleasure and profit in the whorehouse, his wife, though powerless to force her husband to perform his conjugal “duties,” nevertheless occupies a position of racial-sexual privilege and power that enables her, through an act of substitution, to force a black girl to produce the sexual pleasure that her husband refuses. The mistress’ abuse of the child also reads as violent punishment for “taking” her place in her husband’s bed—if not in his affections. Unable to discipline her husband, she penalizes his victim. *Corregidora*’s configuration of the mistress’ abuse complicates both historical and contemporary white feminist insistence on women’s shared subjugation by not only highlighting the mistress’ racial power. It also does so by stressing her sexual power when she assumes her husband’s gendered position—an assumption she can effect only in relation to her black slave.⁵⁵

the significance of Jones’ literalized—though no less textured—treatment of this motif of interracial, same-sex sexual abuse. That is, writing in the early-mid-1970s, in the wake and midst of multiple racial and feminist-womanist liberation movements and over a century after Jacobs, Jones could portray explicitly the possibility of sexual abuse inherent in the hierarchical power dynamics between a white mistress and her black female slave in a way that Jacobs never could, given her antebellum appeal to a middle-class, white female audience. Jones’ rewriting of what Jacobs must leave “between the lines of her narrative,” as Spillers would have it, becomes another instance of the nineteenth-century “unspeakable” becoming “unspoken.” *Diacritics* 17. Summer (1987): p. 65-81.

⁵⁵Although she is otherwise attentive to white women’s abusive deployments of their racial power in their relations with women of color, Kalí Tal, for instance, categorically

In a pointedly parodic reconfiguration of the approved “paternalism” that has been ascribed to Brazilian slavery, Jones’ novel constructs the two white “parental” figures as sexual abusers, refusing any sentimentalization or domestication of black people’s enslavement.⁵⁶ Indeed, *Corregidora’s* exploration of black women’s sexual exploitation as a foundational component in the creation of Brazilian familial *and* national wealth expresses itself in Corregidora’s naming of Great-Gram as “‘a good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece’” (10).⁵⁷ Together with coffee, cotton, and tobacco, gold mining was a significant part of the Brazilian slave economy. Great-Gram informs her descendants that “they had your mens working down in mines,” fictionally representing historians’ conclusion that black men formed the overwhelming majority of

rejects the possibility of same-sex, interracial sexual assaults: “Since antebellum days, white men have considered access to black women’s bodies their privilege by virtue of their status as white *and* male. (White women, while they participate in the oppression of women of color, do not rape them). *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.159.

⁵⁶None other than Daniel P. Moynihan, who seems to have been wedded to a profound misunderstanding of black people’s history, cites Nathan Glazer in order to favorably compare Brazilian slavery to its United States’ counterpart. According to both, “‘the Brazilian slave knew he was a man’” (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1965). As recently as 1986, however, a historian who seemed genuinely interested in the perspectives of the slaves could still assert that planters “dropped violence and threats in favor of patriarchal and paternalistic forms of manipulation. They sought to make the slave a servant, a member of the extended family...” (*To Be a Slave in Brazil*), p. 89. As another historian has argued, in contrast, “the origins and development of the durable myth of the good-natured Brazilian master and his contented slave” evolved after the abolitionist movement gained momentum throughout Britain and the Americas, prompting “the Luso-Brazilian world...to wage its own systematic campaign both at home and abroad to defend and exonerate slavery and the slave trade.” Robert Edgar Conrad, *Children of God’s Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. xx. Needless to say, the apologists for Brazilian slavery did not take the slaves’ viewpoint into consideration.

⁵⁷In one of many of the discomfiting echoes the novel sounds between Corregidora’s and black men’s demeaning treatment of black women, Mutt uses similar metonymic imagery to assert his “ownership” of Ursa: “‘Your pussy’s a little gold piece, ain’t it, Urs? My little gold piece’” (60).

the slaves who were forced into gold production.⁵⁸ But the novel insistently draws our attention to Corregidora's conceptualization of black women's sexual role in the production of his and his country's wealth through the slaveholder's rejection of gold-mining in favor of his violent transformation of Great-Gram and other enslaved women into both his own personal gold mine and currency. The women produce more of his wealth by giving birth and, forced into prostitution, continuously circulate among the "other [white] men and they would give [us] money and [we] had to give it over to him." So although "the king give him lands, and slaves and things, ...he didn't hardly use nothing but the womens" (23). Reduced to the "signs of [her] sex" in order to satisfy Corregidora's "genital fantasies" (59) of maintaining racial and economic supremacy through sexual domination by subordinating coffee production to the reproduction of mulatto slaves who would both increase his wealth and satisfy his lust⁵⁹, Great Gram—in this enclosed, self-perpetuating system—cannot conceptualize a maternal subjectivity that does not function as an act of resistance. She enacts a maternal practice that is a sign of both liberation and abjection. In several instances, Jones' metaphoric language underscores the extent of this domination. When she is no longer sent out to the coffee

⁵⁸Without engaging in the seemingly inexhaustible debate about the novel's mimetic performance of history, we need not ignore that the novel dramatizes the cliometric aspects of African American history.

⁵⁹In his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself*, the abolitionist foregrounds the legislations in the United States which dictated that "the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to [slaveholders] own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable" (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 14. This legal codification of *partus sequitur ventrem* enacted the preeminence of maternity in the formation of African American subjectivity even as it denied any maternal prerogatives of black mothers. Further, it accorded no paternity—white or black—to the African American subject, the original and devastating deployment of the black "single-parent household."

fields, Great Gram becomes the “coffee-bean woman” (66), the embodiment and substitute who signifies the system of concubinage and reproduction that replaces the plantation’s mode of agricultural production. Later, in one of Ursa’s many dream sequences, the narrative signifies on Corregidora’s *and* Gram’s logic of procreative substitution for commodity production with the recurrent symbol of the coffee that was so essential to the creation of Brazilian wealth⁶⁰: “I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it’s time to give witness, I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I’ll stain my hands” (54).⁶¹

Years later, following her escape from the violence of her enslavement, Great Gram’s sole determination becomes her refusal to enable any institutional and cultural denial of such systemic sexual brutality:

Because they didn’t want to leave evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That’s why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn’t be evidence to hold up against them (14).

⁶⁰Increased coffee production led to an intensification of the slave trade in the nineteenth century and it has been estimated that “by 1850 coffee represented over 50% of the value of Brazil’s exports and accounted for nearly 50% of the entire world’s coffee production” *The Abolition of Slavery in Brazil*, p.183.

⁶¹Another, though not mutually exclusive, interpretation of Ursa’s dream recognizes Ursa’s longing to transform her legacy. She does not wish to revel in the residual bloodstains of her violated maternal history but instead transform that history into an art. Her dream of a creation of a fetus out of coffee grounds symbolically registers her longing for an art form that uses and radically transforms her maternal inheritance.

Great Gram's maternal edict to "make generations," visibly mixed-race descendants who would function as the "evidence" and testimony against the white verdict⁶² of incontestable but innocent dominance, is the intentional legacy that Ursa must recognize as an adoption of the slaveholders' own terms. Thus when Ursa's lover, Tadpole—in his role as an historiographer who challenges Great Gram's conclusions about her and her daughters' maternal function—hears the edict for the first time, he understands immediately that the maternal insistence on "procreation...could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking" (22). Despite the different motivation behind the procreative injunction, it does not depart far enough from that of "Old Man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger [who] fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed" (9). In this instance, Tadpole's position permits him the critical distance to understand that—to borrow Audre Lorde's metaphor—a reactionary appropriation of the oppressor's tools may only reinforce the foundations of the institutions he has constructed.⁶³ Although Tadpole immediately recognizes the confluence of the slavebreeder's institution of rape, concubinage, and reproduction and the ex-slave woman's own procreative mandates, Ursa and her more proximate maternal antecedents, Gram and Mama, do not.⁶⁴ Even

⁶²One wonders about the tribunal in which Great Gram presumes this trial would take place. Is this the court of history? At what future time does she imagine the empowerment of black people that would engender such a trial?

⁶³"The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House." *Sister/Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), p.110-113.

⁶⁴It is essential to observe that the older women in Ursa's family are identified only by their maternal designation, an insistent reminder of the preeminent role that has shaped each woman's subjectivity at the subordination of all else. The inscription of Ursa's first name, then, distinguishes her from the rest even though she is the fourth generation girl-woman to use the surname, "Corregidora." Translated from the Latin as "bear," Ursa's name enables an impossibly rich repertoire of signification. Is she a minor or major player in this familial/institutional history? Does she exhibit the defining characteristics

though the second- and third-generation women, too, have been wholly defined by and put into service for “breeding” evidence, and, therefore, have suffered the attendant violence, their familial position and historical moment have shaped their acceptance of the terms of their inheritance. Gram’s place within this line of descent is particularly instructive for understanding *Corregidora*’s exploration of maternal complicity within this economy of sexual abuse.

Ursa’s grandmother, Gram, “the first mulatto daughter” (9), whose master and father is Corregidora, was born in 1888, the year of legal Brazilian abolition. Born into slavery but having no memory of it, Gram was taught by her mother that her body—bearing its visible marks of interracial sex—must substitute for the deliberately destroyed historical archives that otherwise would record the systemic sexual violation of black women. Gram recalls her dutiful service to her own daughter, Ursa’s mother: “And that’s when the officials burned all the papers cause they wanted to play like what had happened before never did happen. But I know it happened, I bear witness that it happened” (79). The story of Gram’s birth that was passed on to Ursa by Mama, Gram’s daughter, captures the signification of black maternal degradation:

I never told you how Great Gram had Gram. She thought
she had to go to the toilet, and then something told her not

of ferocity and capacity for protection that are routinely associated with the omnivorous mammal after whom she is named? Can she endure and survive the history she has inherited? And since she cannot give birth (“bear children”) to others, in what ways might she continue to testify (“bear witness”) to this history and transmit it forward? Within the context of Black Atlantic literary history, Jones’ creation of Ursa’s name carries notable signification insofar as Afro-Brazilian author Maria F. dos Reis published her novel *Ursula* in 1859, the same year in which Harriet Wilson published *Our Nig*, making them the “first two black women to publish a novel in any language,” as far as current research has uncovered (See Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s “Introduction” to the latter).

to go outside to the outhouse like she was going to, and then she squat down on the chamber pot. And then that's how she had Gram, coming out in the slop jar. That's how we all begin, remember that. That's how we all begin. A mud ditch or a slop jar or hit the floor or the ground. It's all the same. But you got to make generations, you go on making them any way (41).

Having not had the benefit of the kind of contemporary prenatal counsel that would have prepared her for the physiological indicators of childbirth and, certainly, having no access to any birth chamber that a plantation mistress would have occupied, the black slave girl relies on an intuition that prevents her from giving birth in a latrine. Saved from the latrine but taking its first breath in a slop jar, the black baby still signifies as human waste. Jones' construction of a symbolic economy of the beginnings of black social identity through Gram's birth underscores the narrative's assertion that the first generations born outside the plantation system were, in the eyes of their parents' owners, worth less than the enslaved generations because, no longer part of the planters' asset ledgers, they had lost all value and, henceforth, would be treated like "shit."

Corregidora's routine sexual abuse of Gram, his daughter, highlights the continuity between black women's exploitation before and after legal emancipation. Gram recalls that her master-father "raised me and then when I got big enough he started fucking me. Seem like he raised me fucking me" (172). And Gram connects her incestuous abuse after her "Mama ran off" to Corregidora's habitual abuse of the enslaved women before her:

Yeah, Mama told me how in the old days he was just buying up women. They'd have to raise up their dress so

he could see what they had down there, and then he feel their bellies to see if they had solid bellies. And they had to be pretty. He wasn't buying up them fancy mulatta womens though. They had to be black and pretty. They had to be the color of his coffee beans.⁶⁵

Corregidora's engagement with the effects of intergenerational incestuous abuse on its victims and its related interrogation of black maternal complicity around the figure of Gram enact their most dramatic articulation in an extended, symbolically incestuous scene that includes Ursa's father, Martin. Married to Ursa's mother, Mama, the "smooth satin-black" and "good-lookin" (112) son-in-law, Martin, emerges as the figurative son and lover-husband in the *Corregidora* women's household, provisionally and complicatedly substituting for all the sons who had been sold off by the slaveholder as well as the black lovers and husbands the earlier generations were denied. In this scene, which I quote at length in order to convey fully its figurative and narrative wealth, Gram's behavior reveals all that she has learned from her master-father:

Well, what happened is he must've started through their room and there she was, sitting on that bed in there powdering up under her breasts. I don't know if she seen him or not—this was your grandmamma—but she just kept powdering and humming, cause when I started through there, there she was powdering, and looking down at her breasts, and lifting them up and powdering under them, and

⁶⁵*Corregidora's* color fetishism—his economic and sexual preference for dark, "pretty," slave women—reverses the notion that the "high yellow" woman was routinely the slaveholder's favored object of desire. But Jones' reversal does not seek merely to invert the complexion-coded hierarchical standard of beauty with which black women have been measured in order to restore dark women's "desirability." Rather she emphasizes that the black female body, dark or light, was simultaneously fetishized and "latrinated," always subjugated by white male power, as *Corregidora's* treatment of Great Gram and Gram exemplifies.

there he was just standing in the door with his arms spread up over the door, and sweat showing through his shirt, just watching her (129).

Ursa's grandmother's provocative self-presentation as an eroticized object of her son-in-law's "look" and her simultaneous construction of him as the erotic object of her own gaze recreate the dynamics of the kind of sexual economy established by her father, Corregidora, in which the parental figure establishes his or herself as an agent of sexual desire and expression, thereby constructing the child as an (il)legitimate object of parental lust. In this reconfigured Corregidora household, the genders are reversed with the maternal figure as the originator of misplaced desire in both her eroticized exposure to her son (in-law) and her self-presentation as a potential sexual rival of her daughter. As the scene continues to unfold, Mama grows increasingly confused about her role as daughter and wife:

I don't know what kind of expression he had on his face His lips was kind of smiling, but his eyes wasn't. He seen me and he just kept standing there. I was looking at Mama and then looking up at him, and after he seen me the first time he just kept looking at her. She was acting like she didn't know we was there, but I know she had to know (129-130).

The intermediary figure between Martin and Gram, Mama becomes infantilized as the uncomprehending child who has come unexpectedly upon an erotic interaction between her mother and a man who, in all his symbolic guises here, functions as son (in-law), father, brother, potential lover, and sexually frustrated husband. The confusion that marks Mama's experience of this encounter deteriorates further into negation. Neither

“parent”/sexual rival acknowledges her presence even though this refusal of recognition is an “act.” Jones’ re-staging of Freud’s “primal” scene for the black “child,” “mother,” and “father,” however, enacts a very historically distinct sense of the African American family. Always already shaped by white incestuous assault, each family member confounds and is confounded by notions of appropriate sexual roles.

Jones’ tableau further suggests her examination of the ways in which such questions around sexual roles center on the figures of the “black matriarch” or “strong black woman” along with her negative corollary, the “absent black father” or “emasculated black man” which had become ascendant during the period of *Corregidora*’s writing and publication:

He was just standing there like he was hypnotized or something. I know she knew. She knew it, cause they both knew he wasn’t getting what he wanted from me.... I don’t know when it was she decided she’d let him know she seen him, but then all of a sudden she set the box of powder down and looked up. Her eyes got real hateful. First she looked at me, then she looked at him. “You black bastard, watching me. What you doing watching me, you black bastard?”....She kept calling him a nasty black bastard and he kept calling her a half-white heifer.”

“‘Messing with my girl, you ain’t had no right messing with my girl.’”

“‘I’m a come over there and mess with your ass the next time you show it’” (129-130).

In her analysis of the “controlling images” that have been deployed in order to sustain ideologies of African American women’s “otherness” and, therefore, justify their vilification, Patricia Hill Collins argues that as “overly aggressive, unfeminine women,

Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands. These men, understandably, either desert their partners or refuse to marry the mother of their children.”⁶⁶ Jones manipulates this image of the castrating black woman, seemingly aligning Gram’s “hatefulness” with this formulation of black women in as much as her presence dominates the scene and her Medusa-like stare “hypnotizes” Martin into apparent powerlessness. He, however, does not remain immobilized or mute but instead confronts Gram’s unquestioning assumption, here, of her role as the white man’s mouthpiece and willing overseer of black men’s sexual prerogatives (“no right messing with my girl”). Martin comes out of his trance when Gram attacks him with language very similar to that which Corregidora uses when he forbids Great-Gram to sleep with black men. The entire scene—with its replay of distorted, corrupted sexual expression within a figurative parental relationship—inscribes Gram’s inherited knowledge and experience of abusive sexuality, a knowing that she does not disrupt here but, instead, appropriates and deploys at her daughter’s expense. Her deployments run directly along the sexual axis initially established by Corregidora.

Corregidora’s manipulation of Gram in this scene as the embodiment of the “strong black woman” reflects on the manner in which black women in their role as mothers may identify with that formulation and situates Martin as an interrogator of such a stance. The narrative does so, however, in a way that complicates the dynamics of the interrogation. On the one hand, Martin’s challenge to Gram suggests Jones’ rejection of the claim that contemporary black women writers were interested only in creating black

⁶⁶*Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: HarperCollins Academic, 1990), p. 74.

male characters who functioned as foils against which black women's strength could be accentuated. On the other hand, Martin's masculinist responses to Gram here and, later, to Great-Gram underscore the novel's scrutiny of both black men's misguided attempts to recuperate patriarchal privileges and their misinterpretation of black women's sexual history. When Martin threatens to "mess with your ass the next time" in reaction to his mother-in-law's sexual display, does he mean to beat her up, rape her or both? Although his threat carries some ambiguity, it does not equivocate about the destructive violence that would follow if he acted on his rage.

Martin does not carry out his threat of violence against Gram but, significantly, he abuses Mama in a scene that comes earlier than this one although, chronologically, it is a later development in the story. This harrowing section is exhaustive in its representation of Martin's verbal, physical and symbolic sexual abuse. He calls Mama a "bitch" before "slapping [her] all over the face." And, despite its initial retreat from the overtones of rape in Mama's revelation that Martin "stopped himself" before "going...straight for my cunt," the text returns to both the possibility of and metaphors for sexual assault towards the scene's conclusion. Barely able to hold herself together after the beating, Mama determines "to get out of [Martin's room]" because she "'didn't want him to do anything else.'" As she attempts to leave, Martin "grabbed my pants.... He grabbed them by the waist...and the elastic broke" (119-120). Ursa's mother escapes further physical abuse but suffers even more humiliation when Martin calls her a "whore," leaving her to encounter the "disgusted" stares and offensive innuendos of both women and men on the street. In this scene, *Corregidora* traverses a very fine line in its manipulation of the enduring figure of the black-man-as-rapist—even as it invokes and repudiates the equally

enduring myth of the black-woman-as-whore. Its deliberate approach to and retreat—though not hasty—from that formulation exemplifies the novel’s simultaneous engagement with historical and contemporary discursive practices that inform its complicated critique of racial and gender hierarchies. That is, Jones uses Martin’s abuse of Mama—as she does Mutt’s and Tadpole’s treatment of Ursa—to interrogate intraracial gender issues, including physical and sexual violence, that an emergent black feminist discourse had brought to the forefront of African American cultural politics in the early to mid-1970S. That feminist critique intersects with the novel’s rejection of white hegemonic protocols that have included, since the postbellum period, the deployment of the iconic, sexually violent black man and the sexually promiscuous black woman. In *Corregidora*, Jones—as other contemporary black women writers like Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker and others would attempt to do—must negotiate an incisive analysis of black male dominance that does not reinscribe racist ideologies. In the narrative separation between Martin’s threat and, later, enactment of violence as well as in the nullification of an actual rape, *Corregidora* reveals its resistance against the demonization of black men even as it explicates the dangers of their assumption of gender privileges.

Later, when Mama tells Ursa that Martin had asked the older Corregidora women the question she had “never had the nerve to ask” but had certainly contemplated—“How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love?” (131)—both she and Martin pose the wrong question, at worst or, at best, make an incomplete query. The issue at stake here is not love versus hate. A more pressing and perhaps more productive inquiry might be: for those intimately familiar with the modes and dynamics of incestuous sexual

abuse, is it possible to create and sustain relationships that do not resemble the primary ones?⁶⁷

Such an interrogation is crucial because Jones' exploration of intergenerational incest, symbolic and literal, profoundly structures her narrative of the origins of African American families and their consequences for black identity and sexuality, both historically and contemporaneously. Although the Corregidora women's "long story" (59) dominates this telling, other stories of incest broaden her exploration, underlining the novel's amplified cultural concerns beyond one family's chronicle. Despite Tadpole's early announcement that he had no knowledge of his family's slave origins, that "'they ain't told me shit'" (9), after Ursa relates a condensed but revealing account of her own family's history, he later revises this pronouncement and provides an inaugural familial

⁶⁷Martin's assumption of male privilege prompts him to articulate the question about the balance between "love" and "hate" in the older women's relationships with the slaveholder. His hostile query represents a distinct symbolic practice of denial and revision that has sought to rewrite the *systemic* sexual terrorization of enslaved black women with questions of affectional bonds in which, inevitably, black women emerge as little more than co-conspirators or "willing" victims in their own exploitation. This insistence on introducing conceptions of romantic love rather than focusing on the problematic interplay of power and sex within the master-slave relationship has reached, from my perspective, a near-hysterical apogee in the continued fixation on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. I do not argue that interracial "love" could not flourish under the conditions of violence and terror that characterized New World slavery. What I do contend is that a contemporary focus on the possible instances of romantic love and sexual desire between white male slaveholders and black female slaves transforms the victims of rape and sexual assault into the seemingly less offensive "concubines" and "mistresses" while institutionalized rape becomes dehistoricized and reinscribed as "seduction." Not incidentally, as the ideological cleansing of "founding fathers" continues, they emerge as "lovers," not rapists. Saidiya Hartman incisively argues that "as a theory of power, seduction contends that there is an ostensible equality between the dominant and the dominated" and "erects a family romance" that continues to minimize the history and consequences of black women's sexual violation. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 88-89.

narrative that *Corregidora* constructs as simultaneously analogous to and, according to the subtextual tenors of the novel, profoundly different from Ursa's. While emphasizing this difference, which is informed primarily by the racial and marital status of the participants, Tadpole's story enables, indeed demands, a critique of its gendered inscriptions of power. Tadpole discloses that, his own dark skin notwithstanding, his maternal "grandmother was [a] white," poor orphan who was "forced to "work out in the fields with the blacks and treated ... like she was one. She was a little girl about nine, ten, 'leven. My granddaddy took her in and raised her and then when she got old enough he married her. She called him Papa. And when they were married she still called him Papa" (13). Tadpole's account echoes the combined histories of Corregidora's removal of Great Gram from the coffee fields to sexually abuse her and his incestuous rape of Gram when she was "old enough." With its image of the paternal figure marrying his adopted daughter, Tadpole's familial chronicle inscribes his own origins as symbolically incestuous.

Papa's cultivation of the girl—who remains nameless in Tadpole's story—also reveals his intention to treat her as his private crop. While he may not have been responsible for her planting in the fields, he raises and, eventually, harvests her once he determines to reap the rewards of his labor—marriage, sex and procreation. Yet *Corregidora* remains ambivalent of its inscription of black male husbandry⁶⁸—that is, its recognition that some black men might fully enjoy the benefits of masculine privilege despite their experiences of racial domination. The narrative attempts, therefore, to

⁶⁸See Mark Wigley, "Untitled: The Housing of Gender," in *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), p. 327-389.

recuperate the potentially abusive character of this interracial relationship through its portrayal of “Papa” as a socially powerless slave whose generosity to the white orphan girl far exceeds those of her own race who take advantage of her subordinate class and gender status. Moreover, Papa does not make her his concubine but marries her, thereby conferring social legitimacy on their relationship and offspring.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the vagueness of “old enough” and the asymmetrical dynamics that are constitutive of their relationship remain in their age difference and, most forcefully, in the parental term, “Papa,” with which the grandmother always addressed the grandfather.⁷⁰

Finally, Tadpole’s account indicates that Papa’s generosity to the girl could only have been predicated on her subordinated gender and class position as well as on the absence of her own family. That is to say, as a black slave, Papa has access to the white girl because she has been placed outside the boundaries of normative white womanhood; she has become symbolically “black.”⁷¹ I would argue further that *Corregidora* seeks to distinguish Tadpole’s narrative of origins from Ursa’s in its portrayal of the uniqueness of his story. While the novel insists on the systemic character of white men’s sexual violation of black women—Great Gram recalls that Corregidora “wasn’t the first that did it” and that “the Portuguese who bought slaves paid attention only to the genitals” (23, 54)—Tadpole’s grandparents’ relationship and marriage has no narrative corollary.

⁶⁹Because slave unions were not legally sanctioned, it is difficult to understand what Tadpole means by “marriage.”

⁷⁰*Corregidora* highlights the instability of this legitimacy—the both/and signification of their relationship—through its naming of their grandson “Tadpole,” a nickname that bespeaks what it means to be in a perpetual state of becoming.

⁷¹We remember that this discursive territory of black men’s sexual and marital access to white girls/women after the latter’s symbolic racial transformation had been established by Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*.

Nevertheless it points to the manner in which slavery's protocols of (re)production invite black men to align themselves with its values. Indeed, the second story of black male familial origins to which I draw our attention attempts to recuperate, intratextually, any lingering uneasiness about ancestral illicit black male access to women and exertion of power that Tadpole's story might have engendered.

Chronologically, the story of Mutt, Ursa's first husband, comes relatively late in the novel, serving as a bridge between the earlier stories of nineteenth-century heterosexual relationships and the twentieth-century relationships that continue to bear the imprint of those earlier ones. Like Tadpole's grandfather, Mutt's "great-grandfather'[s]—he guessed great-grandfather—“(150) worked as a blacksmith “doing slavery”⁷² (78) enabled him sufficient economic autonomy to “hire hisself out” (150) and, eventually, purchase his and his wife's freedom. But when the couple confronts a perversely ingenious deployment of the often interlocking economies of race, gender, capitalism and the law that could arbitrarily but definitively negate black people's assertion of selfhood, they lose everything:

But then he got in debt to these men, and he didn't have any money, so they came and took his wife. The courts judged that it was legal because even if she was his wife, and fulfilled the duties of a wife, he had bought her, and so she was also his property, his slave. He said his great-grandfather had just gone crazy after that. ‘You can imagine how he must of felt’ (151).

⁷²I rather like this suggestion that slavery was something one was coerced to do rather than what defined one's ontological being. It signals an important separation between the enslavers' perception of the *people* they owned and those people's distinct sense of themselves.

One's disgust at what Saidiya Hartman calls the law's "dual invocation of person and property"⁷³ in Mutt's account is matched by one's dismay that Mutt seems incapable of empathetically "imagining" the emotional devastation of his great-grandmother along with that of his male antecedent, even as he presumes that Ursa can fully experience such cross-gender affective alignment. So obtuse is he to the debasement of his female ancestor—and to Ursa's recognition of his blindness—that when Ursa "step[s] back suddenly" from him "but said nothing" (151), he fails to understand her body language as gestures of disgust and fear of a man whose comprehension of the dehumanizing effects of the racial, legal, and capitalist economies does not extend to gender dominance. Indeed, Mutt's failure to imagine that his great-grandmother's loss equaled his great-grandfather's arises from his acceptance of the solely financial metrics the white debtees and "the court" established to define the black couple's relationship. According to those terms, only economic possession and loss have value, a line of reasoning which ensures the primacy of owners and which undergirded slavery's multiple disciplinary structures.⁷⁴

Mutt's acceptance of the kind of hierarchical gendered terms of ownership that were established by legal imperatives in his great-grandparents' era comes only a short time later in the same section of the novel. Furious that Ursa refuses to relinquish the economic and artistic autonomy she has secured by singing in the blues club where, also,

⁷³*Scenes of Subjection*, p. 80.

⁷⁴Mutt's acquiescence to the monetary measures of valuation that slaveholders devised to negate the human attributes of black people—to transform them into "chattels personal" or private property—should make us wary of contemporary calls for reparations in the form of material signifiers of value. Given our knowledge of slavery's devastation of black individuals, families and communities, can it be possible to measure the value of such loss? And even if possible, would not such calculations reduce black people, once again, to the nation's inventory?

she becomes the focus of other men's sexual attention, Mutt threatens to convert the stage into an auction block from where he would take "bids" for his "piece of ass for sale" (159). Although he initiates this spectacle of Ursa's public humiliation by "[raising] his arm," he does not follow through because, he explains to Ursa later: "' It wasn't on account of you, it was on account of my great-granddaddy. Seeing as how he went through all that for his woman, he wouldn't have appreciated me selling you off'" (160). Ursa's response that "I was hoping that it was for me'" explicitly communicates her individualized desire for Mutt's regard. Her answer also expresses her implicit comprehension of the larger gender dynamics in play. Symbolically, she speaks for the great-grandmother who also deserves her male descendant's consideration rather than his unquestioning designation of her as his great-grandfather's "woman."⁷⁵

If the story of Mutt's familial origins—with its marriage of, presumably, unrelated people—attempts to attenuate the incestuous overtones of the marriage of Tadpole's ancestors, the account nevertheless highlights *Corregidora's* insistence on the vexed position of black women's sexuality within dominant heterosexual economies of patriarchal and racial institutions of the family—during both slavery and post-slavery white supremacy—in which black women "fulfill the duties of a wife;" are circulated in

⁷⁵Mutt's decision to "act out" his grandfather's craziness reveals his consideration of Ursula as his private property over which he exerts control. By aligning himself solely with his grandfather and not with Ursa or his grandmother as well, he fails to recognize that he has access to another body of social knowledge and critical practice that women's experiences exemplify. In her own recognition of this "different cultural text" that the enslavement of black women alongside black men has produced, Hortense Spillers argues that "the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself" and it is the "heritage of the *mother* that the African American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood" ("Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe...") if he wishes to reject the hegemonic legacies of American slavery.

systems of sexual exchange as prostitutes and incestuous prey; and are reduced to “piece[s] of ass” with which men can “play fuck” in humiliating public spectacles (165). Recognizing the systemic deficits for women in these heteropatriarchal economies, Jones’ novel explores homosexuality as an alternative sexual terrain that potentially offers some black women a more empowering expressive sexuality. But, ultimately, this exploration is undermined by *Corregidora*’s own anxieties and discomfort about homosexuality, specifically lesbianism, resulting in its most explicit depiction of a same-sex relationship, that between Cat and Jeffy⁷⁶, as an exploitative, symbolically incestuous one.⁷⁷ When Ursa realizes that her friend, Cat, sexually desires other women, she attempts to negate her in every way, refusing any discursive identification of “what Cat was” (49). Neither Ursa or the novel engages any historical or contemporary term to identify this form of sexual desire, vaguely but knowingly indicating that she was “like that,” and Ursa repeatedly denies Cat her recognition when she gives her the silent treatment: “I didn’t say anything”; “Cat looked at me, but I said nothing” (62) and by refusing visual contact. The almost obsessive repetition of the latter, I believe, underscores the novel’s acknowledgement of both the significance of Ursa’s refusal and

⁷⁶Here, too, names exemplify the characters’ positioning in the novel. First, Jeffy’s name announces the masculine attributes ascribed to her lesbianism, most forcefully in Ursa’s denigration of her as a “bull” but, also, in the revelation that “she had on blue jeans like she always wore,” a contemporary marker of her indeterminate gender categorization (175). Literally, “Cat” is an abbreviation of Catherine in the text but its symbolic significance lies in the zealous sensuality and predatory traits often associated with felines. It is worth noting, too, that Ma Rainey, the preeminent blues singer who acknowledged her same-sex relationships and who, like Cat, was dark-skinned, was also known as the “Paramount Wildcat.” Of course, Ursa, not Cat, is the blues singer in the novel but I would argue that Cat sometimes functions as Ursa’s foil and her naming emerges as one of those instances.

its discomfort with its own construction of Ursa's refusal. Some examples illustrate the text's insistence on this point: "Cat was looking at me, but I didn't look at her." "So long, Cat,' I said, without looking at her;" and "she was waiting for an embrace that I refused to give...She kept looking at me. I wouldn't look up at her" (63-66).

Cat, however, hopes for Ursa's recognition and comprehension, if not approval. In accordance with the novel's deployment of storytelling as a primary discursive mode of self-identification, she offers two intersecting narratives of work and marriage that, again, emphasize the aggravated position of black women's sexuality within interlocking structures of racial and economic domination. Cat explains that her sexual desire for other black women grows out of her attempts to remove herself from both heteroracial economies of marriage and the dominant labor force where, like so many other black women, domestic servitude exposed her to financial and sexual exploitation "in a white woman's kitchen."⁷⁸ After work, she would come home "to feel like a fool in the bed

⁷⁸Cat recalls that she worked as a live-in domestic servant for a white couple and "every morning at six o'clock she had to get up and get Mr. Hirshorn's breakfast because he was the supervisor in a plant, and his wife stayed in the bed sleeping. He always waited till she called him, but one morning he was sitting at the table while she was fixing coffee. "'You pretty, Catherine, you know that? You pretty, Catherine. A lot of you nigger women is pretty.'" "She was saying nothing and then when she'd got the can of coffee grounds down and was opening it to pour in the pot, he was behind her, touching her arm, and she dropped the can, and it banged and rolled across the kitchen floor spilling grains." When the wife inquires about the commotion, Hirshorn, of course, covers his tracks but not without demeaning Cat even further. "'That clumsy nigger. I won't have time to eat breakfast this morning, sweetheart.' While she was bending, she could see him bending to kiss his wife's mouth, then he went out the kitchen door, stepping over coffee grounds. 'You made a mess,' his wife said, and went back to bed" (65-66). This section compels readers to recognize the continuum of black women's sexual and economic exploitation within the (white) domestic sphere from slavery to the twentieth-century, presenting "coffee" as a mnemonic symbol that reminds us of Great-Gram's degradation on the Brazilian plantation as well as the centuries-long enslaved labor force that sustained the production of such quotidian "essentials" like coffee and

with my man” because she would have to subordinate her own desires to his or, equally degrading, pretend desire she did not feel:

‘I didn’t want to be a fool in front of them and then have to come home and be a fool with him too. Couldn’t even get in my own bed and not be a fool and have him make me feel like a fool too’ (65).

Having suffered this humiliating exploitation as a “young woman,” Cat, like countless other black women, turns to the underground industry of hairdressing in order to secure some measure of economic, racial and sexual autonomy as well as to participate in black female community.⁷⁹ However, when readers encounter her for the first time, Cat’s a “dark, dark woman with straightened hair drawn back;” “close to sixty,” and having a sexual relationship with fourteen-year-old Jeffy, “the girl who stayed with her when her mother worked and sometimes when her mother wasn’t working” (14, 27). *Corregidora* forcefully identifies Cat’s and Jeffy’s sexual relationship as an exploitative one in the

sugar. (Andrea Stuart’s 2013 narrative, *Sugar in the Blood: A Family’s Story of Slavery and Empire* which chronicles the manners in which the exploitative production of the “white gold” shaped her lineage underscores slavery’s ongoing legacies). Of course, neither Hirshorn nor his wife has the kind of ownership of Cat’s labor or body that Corregidora and his wife had of their women slaves but his job as “supervisor in a *plant*” (which would be the other viable work choice for Cat) identifies his secured status as twentieth-century, white-man-in-charge.

⁷⁹Madame C.J. Walker who was perhaps the most successful entrepreneur during the first two decades of the twentieth-century, built her fortune by creating the “Walker System of Beauty Culture,” a hair care product line whose manufacture and distribution not only enriched Walker but provided jobs for hundreds of African Americans. See *Black Women In America*, Vol. 3. Ed, Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Oxford University Press), 2005. The success of Walker notwithstanding, it is important to recognize that most black women employed in the hairdressing industry barely earned a subsistence wage as Cat’s status indicates and as Harriet Wilson’s Frado did in an even earlier African American inscription of black women’s search for independence within this industry.

forty-six year age difference between the woman and the girl, a gap that would accord almost incontestable authority to Cat within this socio-cultural context, and in its revelation that Cat exploits Jeffy's mother's necessary absence from her daughter for her own sexual gratification: "[Jeffy] be back here though, cause Lurene got to work tonight. They put her on the night shift down to the factory'" (29). But the narrative goes further, insisting in its construction of the relationship between Cat and Jeffy that theirs is, figuratively, an incestuous one in its characterization of Cat as a surrogate mother, indeed grandmother. Not only does Cat take the place of Jeffy's mother when the latter must work but, imagistically and discursively, she embodies both intra- and extra-textual conceptions of black maternity. Cat, thirty-five years older than Ursa, nurses the younger woman back to health after the miscarriage and hysterectomy; she straightens Jeffy's hair in her kitchen and refers to her as "that baby'" (29).

The ambivalence about lesbianism that *Corregidora* reveals in its simultaneous representation of Cat's and Jeffy's relationship as an exploitative one and its portrayal of Cat as both nurturing (grand)maternal substitute and sexual corruptor also manifests in its corollary construction of Jeffy as both infantile and sexually predatory. When Ursa awakens one night, startled by Jeffy's groping, she recalls that "I felt her hands on my breasts. She was feeling all on me up around my breasts... There was a smell of vomit in the room like when you suck your thumb... I turned on the light and she was sucking her arm and getting the blanket and crying" (39). Imagistically, Jeffy is both a baby seeking the (absent) maternal body and a sexually precocious teenager reaching out for a sexual partner. But the threat that Jeffy's vexed behavior poses to Ursa's heterosexual self-identification, together with its reminder that Ursa's body is no longer capable of

childbearing—this scene takes place during Ursa’s post-hysterectomy convalescence—pushes Ursa to pronounce, perhaps, the text’s most explicit contemporary homophobic epithet against lesbians: “I kept calling her a goddamn bull.” Ursa verbally assaults the teenager with this invective even as she wonders if Cat’s sexual control of the girl was “how Cat Lawson got her to mind” (39).

Corregidora stumbles and flails in its attempt to imagine lesbianism as a desirable alternative to heterosexuality for black women because, until the troubled reconciliation between Ursa and Mutt at the novel’s conclusion,⁸⁰ Jones does not imagine *any* realm of sexuality—historic or contemporary—for African American women that is not marked by exploitation, abuse and misery.⁸¹ But the novel’s inscription of lesbianism suffers,

⁸⁰While Ursa’s and Mutt’s reunion might be interpreted as a hopeful gesture for black women within heterosexual relations, given Ursa’s depicted transformation and Mutt’s unrepresented and, therefore, implicit one, I would argue that the text’s conclusion equivocates and invites a less decisive reading. When Mutt and Ursa meet after a twenty-two year separation, he tells her that she “still got your voice,” but, as in many of their previous interactions, she remains silent, unable to “say anything” (183). Their subsequent lovemaking takes place at the “old place,” not “the same room, but the same place,” a return that signals both change and stasis. Finally, despite Ursa’s assurance that now she, too, desired to perform the fellatio that Mutt had always wanted, one wonders that *Corregidora* does not imagine cunnilingus as the desired sexual act that could symbolize sexual reciprocity and romantic reconciliation. No doubt such a representation would have been a radical one; Jones’ choice reveals the limits of what was ideologically representable in the context of the contemporary politics of sexuality.

⁸¹In addition to the sexual economy of plantation slavery and the sexual dynamics among the twentieth-century primary characters, accounts of secondary characters round out this discourse of troubled sexuality. The novel, for instance, offers the story of the “Melrose girl” who commits suicide for reasons that *Corregidora* leaves undetermined but that it allows its characters to speculate about: “‘They thought it must’ve been some man, you know, got her pregnant or something, but she wasn’t pregnant.’ ‘‘Had to been some man,’ Gram said. ‘I ain’t never known a woman take her life less it was some man’” (132). A few years after the ten year-old Ursa overhears the story of the Melrose girl, her own teenaged friend May Alice becomes pregnant, prompting May Alice’s mother to “slap her” and to explain that “the only reason she didn’t keep slapping her was because she didn’t want to be responsible for anything happening to the baby, and keep her from

too, from its struggle to fully conceptualize a lesbian space within African American culture that could enable, for example, a different characterization of Cat. Such a crisis of imagination in Cat's figuration again exemplifies the potential pitfalls of the novel's engagement of the complex icon of the "strong black woman." Prominent discursive formulations of black women throughout the 1960s and 70s rarely acknowledged black lesbians. Instead articulations of the problems and, less often, the joys of black sexual and romantic partnerships were foregrounded in heteronormative terms. Ann Allen Shockley's critique of, first, the absence and, second, the stereotypical caricatures of lesbians in African American literature concludes that "the ideologies of the sixties provided added impetus to the Black community's negative image of homosexuality. This was the period when the Black movement was flourishing, bringing with it the promotion of Black male identity to offset the myth of the Black matriarchy. Some Black women...unwittingly encourag[ed] a new subserviency at the expense of Black womanhood....In view of this...the independent woman-identified-woman—the Black Lesbian—was a threat."⁸² Situating *Corregidora's* representation of lesbianism within an ideological and literary context, one realizes that Cheryl Clarke did not publish her

paying the consequences she deserved to pay" (141). Taking her cues from the adults around her about the fearful repercussions of sexual relations for heterosexual black girls, Ursa "kept tying [the Melrose girl] and May Alice together. I don't know why I did. And it was always May Alice laying up there in that alley" (145). Of course, one recognizes that in as much as May Alice performs the role of reverse-mirror image of Ursa in the Bildungsroman that comprises the first part of section three of the novel, Ursa imagines *herself* "laying up in that alley" which is exactly where the novel, too, fears that she and every black girl/woman may end up at some point in their lives. Because when we meet Ursa in the novel's first pages, it is through her account of being knocked down by her husband in the "short alley" behind the Drake Hotel (3).

⁸²"The Black Lesbian in American Literature: An Overview," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), p. 83-93.

essay “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance” until 1979, four years after *Corregidora*’s publication. The germinal anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* which included, among others, Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” was published in 1981. Indisputable lesbian characters in widely circulated novels like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* were published in 1982 and 1987, respectively.⁸³ It is worth remembering, however, that Shockley’s lesbian novel *Loving Her* was published in 1974 but its marginal reception speaks, at least in part, to the contemporary heterosexist politics that the author delineates in her critical essay.

In its struggle to depict the potential dangers of the heterosexual economy for black women, *Corregidora* acknowledges an alternative sexual paradigm. Yet the relative invisibility of lesbianism in antecedent *literary* representations together with

⁸³One of the foundational essays of contemporary black feminist criticism, Barbara Smith’s 1977 “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” created a stir and unsettled many, including Toni Morrison, when Smith asserted that “despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters” in Morrison’s *Sula*, which was published in 1973, it worked “as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance towards the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family.” *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scottt, and Barbara Smith. (Old Westbury: The Feminist Press, 1982), p. 165. Indeed Ursa’s and May Alice’s adolescent friendship very much resembles Sula’s and Nel’s “passionate” one. In an interview published in 1983, six years after Smith’s article, Morrison forcefully rejects Smith’s argument, asserting that “there is no homosexuality in *Sula*.” While I am not primarily interested here in resolving what I am sure are the intricate politics of editorial influence, I do wish to note that Morrison was the editor with whom Gayl Jones worked in the years before and during the publication of *Corregidora*. Morrison’s emphatic denial reveals an anxiety that readers may discern the possibility of homosexuality in her text regardless of her authorial intent, a surprising reaction from an author who emphasizes a desired collaboration between readers and literature in order to create meaningful elucidations. *Black Women Writers at Work*. Ed. Claudia Tate (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1990), p. 118.

what amounted to “compulsory heterosexuality” in dominant African American cultural spaces, undermine *Corregidora*’s reconceptualization of the continuum of black women’s sexuality, resulting in its construction of its lesbian characters as sexually aberrant.⁸⁴ One of the dismaying effects of Jones’ problematic entrance into this textual, though obviously not historical, vacuum remains Ursa’s horror at the lesbian nature of the relationship between Cat and Jeffy rather than the abuse of power and betrayal of symbolic maternal trust that Cat perpetrates—even though the novel makes it virtually impossible to disentangle the two.⁸⁵

Years after the bedroom encounter between Ursa and Jeffy—after Cat has left town and thus, paradoxically and symbolically, re-occupied a textually reproduced marginal lesbian space—a “grownup” Jeffy informs Ursa that Cat has suffered a disfiguring accident in the factory where she worked making “Dixie cups or something like that” (176.). This revelation spotlights the issue of the chronically dangerous conditions of the factories in which black women labored, thereby emphasizing that black, working-class women often exchanged at least one set of perils for another when they sought employment in the manufacturing industries rather than in “white women’s

⁸⁴I emphasize “literary” because Jones’ decision to make Ursa, her protagonist, a blues singer might indicate her awareness of, for instance, Bessie Smith’s and Ma Rainey’s incorporation of their same-sex sexual experiences into their lyrics and performances. In her 1981 full-length study of Ma Rainey, Sandra Lieb notes that Chris Albertson’s *Bessie* (1972) provides evidence for both Ma Rainey’s and Smith’s “bisexuality.” However, while the blues singers’ self-presentations made audible their same-sex desires, I would argue that their very status as blues artists—beloved cultural icons and acknowledged renegades—accorded them a license of self-representation that was not extended to other black women.

⁸⁵Because Cat’s sexuality primarily defines her character, its “deviance” distorts every relationship in which she engages, hence her corruption of her role as Jeffy’s surrogate mother. Her lesbianism denies her the possibility of being a good “mother.”

kitchens.” But equally important as the economic discourse here are the punitive—psychological and corporeal—measures the text deploys in order to penalize Cat’s transgressive lesbian sexuality:

‘She was reaching down to get something and got her hair caught in one of these machines and it pulled all her hair out. Well, it pulled all the top part out. Might as well say all of it. She was in the hospital about six months.... Bad thing to happen to a woman, ain’t it?... That kind of thing makes you don’t feel like a woman’ (176-77).

In a narrative in which desirable femininity within the black community belongs to those women who, like Ursa, her mother and her grandmother have long hair and light skin, Cat, who has been characterized earlier as “dark, dark” (14) and who “talk the same way in front of men as she do women” (21), is completely defeminized by this denudation which transforms her into a monstrosity that, perhaps, rivals the “bull” Ursa sees in Jeffy. Ironically, too, Cat, the hairdresser, does not seem to have sufficient talents to remedy her hair disaster, complacently accepting the “shitty wigs” her employers provide as compensation for her disfigurement. Jeffy’s conviction that Cat needed to be encouraged “to get her ass together. Ain’t no use of her bleeding over that shit” (177) implies that Cat has accepted her mutilation as the punishment she must endure for her transgressions, much as she accepted Ursa’s ostracism before she retreated into self-imposed exile.

Although Ursa’s heterosexism ruptures her bond with Cat, the discourse of defeminization around the latter evokes an earlier articulation of the link between gender identity—specifically, womanhood—and its signs when Ursa’s uterus is removed after

her miscarriage. The hysterectomy has the “consequence” of making Ursa feel “as if part of my life’s already marked out for me—the barren part” and “feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out,” making her “delirious,” “evil,” and “scared” that she is no longer (hetero)sexually desirable (6, 26). But it is not only Ursa, weighed down by her maternal imperative to “make generations,” who fears that the loss of childbearing capability equals a woman’s loss of femininity. *Corregidora* emphasizes that Ursa’s response accords with a larger communal view and the novel signifies on the discursive and imagistic registers of hysteria that, conventionally, have been associated with hysterectomies. Initially, Cat hesitates to visit Ursa because “I didn’t want to take [food] up myself, cause ... women get evil after something like that and I don’t like to mess with no evil women. Tell her I be up to see her when she feeling all right” (9). Later, Jeffy reveals that “I heard Mama talking bout women like that. Mess up their minds and then fuck up their pussy” (38). Notwithstanding her own subjection to conceptions of normative femininity that disparage those who no longer possess the phenotypical or biological signs which supposedly guarantee one’s status as a desirable woman, Ursa refuses to recognize Cat or Jeffy as a “sister” or as an ally. Although *Corregidora* does not seem to question Ursa’s rejection of Cat and Jeffy, its own expansive explorations of the women’s relationships and their positions within subjugating systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality compel readers to comprehend that empowering black female friendships and communities cannot be created and nurtured when African American women take refuge in potentially oppressive structures of identity—heterosexuality and (upper-)middle-class status, for instance. One of the most striking features of *Corregidora* and its representation of twentieth-century black

womanhood is the absence of such a sustained, supportive community because the potential of community is routinely fractured around issues of sexuality.⁸⁶

In addition to the novel's strained exploration of lesbian sexuality, the absence of what I would call a horizontally-aligned women's community—peer relationships among women who are not familially related and/or relatives of the same generation—characterizes *Corregidora's* construction. This absence derives from the text's preeminent focus on the maternal-filial (or vertical-familial) lineage that emerges from an inheritance of incestuous violation. Ursa, therefore, must question the primacy of her maternal legacy in order to envision an autonomous, productive life. Ursa's identity bears the weight of a claustrophobic maternal presence that suffocates and excludes almost all other relations and practices that could engender a healthy selfhood. This maternal excess—with its attendant confusion and dissolution of genealogical boundaries—is engendered by Corregidora's rape of the eleven year-old slave girl who eventually becomes Great Gram, the subsequent birth of Gram, and the continued incestuous violence from which Ursa's own mother is conceived. By simultaneously consolidating his patriarchal power through incestuous violence and economic

⁸⁶Besides the relationship among Cat, Jeffy and Ursa, *Corregidora* explores the girlhood relationship between Ursa and May Alice, a relationship that ends when May Alice becomes pregnant as a teenager. Even as an adolescent girl, Ursa insisted on her heterosexuality, a necessary avowal in the novel's construction of its heroine's adherence to heteronormative terms of sexual identity. After May Alice's pregnancy is confirmed, she "kept hugging me and crying, and hugging me, and saying why couldn't I have been Harold and then nothing would have happened" but "I didn't know what she was talking about then" (14). The more obvious interpretation of May Alice's lament is that her platonic relationship with Ursa would not have ended in a pregnancy. But, of course, a less heterosexually determined interpretation of that remark and Ursa's "ignorant" response recognizes that a sexual relationship between the two girls would not have produced a pregnancy either.

husbandry, Corregidora ensures that no black man challenges his access to the black and mulatto women. This three-generational absence of a black father—briefly but insufficiently reclaimed by Ursa’s father—renders an ur-maternal presence that, I would argue, functions as a figurative response to 1960s’ and 1970s’ cultural deployments of the “black matriarch,” an iconic relative of the “strong black woman.”

As noted above, “The Moynihan Report” receives the overwhelming credit for the currency of the “black matriarch” whose alleged financial, parental and social power within the home and the larger black communal realm had usurped black men’s patriarchal prerogatives of economic provision, domestic command and community leadership. While others, most notably E. Franklin Frazier, previously had hypothesized about the causes and potential consequences of the relatively significant number of women-headed households within African American communities,⁸⁷ alarms for national mobilization did not sound until Moynihan’s white, patriarchal imprimatur authenticated and transformed Franklin’s narrative. Although the largely male leadership of black political movements summarily rejected most dominant, white characterizations of African American communities, it was often too eager to accept Moynihan’s denigration of black motherhood, adding its own ahistoric denunciations of black mothers as unnaturally dominant. Jones’ figurative engagement with these productions of the “black matriarch” and her corollary, the “absent” black father insists on bringing out of the shadows of this discourse—through the figure of Corregidora—the white, patriarchal

⁸⁷Franklin frames his discussion of the black “matriarchate” by emphasizing that “these women had doubtless been schooled in self-reliance and self-sufficiency during slavery.” *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 102. Revised and abridged in 1948.

structure whose power could determine the trajectory of African American families and communities. In other words, if the black father has been displaced and if configurations of familial relations in black homes have unfolded along lines of matrilineal descent, such developments must be traced not to a black cultural “pathology” characterized by black women’s usurpation of black men’s authority. Rather, this ascendant “matriarchy” exposes the white, patriarchal, multi-generational sexual violence against black women and its concomitant denial of a black paternal presence, or what Hortense Spillers calls a “cultural situation that is *father-lacking*.”⁸⁸

In one of the few instances in which Great Gram indicates that some of the slaves attempted to forge communal ties away from the customary surveillance that restricted their lives on the plantation, she remembers a young man who confided his plans to flee to a Quilombo community (an enclave of runaway/former slaves) in Palmares where “black mens... had some dignity.” Corregidora, however, assumes that the conversations between the two young slaves prove an unauthorized sexual relationship (126). His rage is such that Gram recalls, “I ain’t never seen him look like that, cause when he send them white mens in there to me he didn’t look like that, cause he be nodding and saying what a fine piece I was” (127). Great Gram’s memory of this episode further captures two of the enduring nineteenth and twentieth-century maternal-sexual constructs that have sought to denigrate black women’s identities, namely the Breeder and Jezebel, the whore. “Cause tha’s all they do to you, was feel up on you down between your legs see what kind of genitals you had, either so you could breed well, or make a good whore.”

⁸⁸“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe...”, p. 80.

Corregidora ensures his social and economic power beyond his own plantation by reserving his “fine pieces” for other white men: “Don’t let no black man fool with you, do you hear? I don’t want nothing black fucking with my pussy.’ Let his own color mess with me all they want to” (127). In this racially-ordered world, black men, too, are “studded” but decisively excluded from the economy of masculine power that guarantees sexual access informed by desire or purchased with cold cash. When black male slaves received permission to “fool” with some “pieces,” the resulting “issue” (future “breeders,” “whores,” and “bucks” but, surely, not children) are not theirs to father, but rather the property that further consolidates the master’s sexual, economic, and racial supremacy.

Corregidora’s regime of white male sexual exclusivity and supremacy, however, does not seek to negate the “threat” of generic black male slaves. He regards the black men to whom he’s biologically related as the primary threat to his system of white patriarchal rule. When Ursa “asked Great Gram once when I was real small if Grandmama had any brothers or sisters...she’d given this real hateful look.” Later, Ursa repeats the question to her own mother who gives a qualified, though revealing, response. “I think there was some boys. I think they told me there was some boys but Corregidora sold the boys off.” “Why?” “Don’t ask *them* that. The only reason I’m telling you is so you won’t ask them” (61). Within the terms of his own corrupt construction of family *relations*, Corregidora perceives his biological male “issue” as a double risk. Having no reservations about having sexually assaulted his own daughters, he imagines his sons as potential sexual rivals who may share his incestuous proclivities.

Alternatively, even if his sons do not claim incestuous sexual privileges, they might attempt to defy his own and seek retaliation for maternal and filial abuse. In either scenario black men—whom he had produced—would contest his dominance, hence their banishment from his plantation. In *Corregidora*, the absence of black fathers and the preeminence of mothers in the black family symbolically emerge as effects of not a “pathological” black matriarchy but rather of white male domination and perversion.

Notwithstanding its figurative—but historically engaged—rejoinder to Moynihan, et al, *Corregidora* does not uncritically venerate this maternal preeminence. Jones’ novel explores the disabling reverberations of a matrilineage that has been created by multiple violent material and discursive economies. This examination includes, first, her interrogation of maternal language and storytelling as an always-established source of empowerment for black women. The empowered and empowering “maternal voice” has emerged as a central symbol of intergenerational women’s alliances in black feminist criticism. In essays, anthologies, and book-length inquiries, critics argue that black women characters in mid-late twentieth-century narratives such as Walker’s *Meridian*, Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, and Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girls*, *Brownstones* and *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*, in the words of Barbara Christian, “are who they are because of their *maternal* ancestry and their knowledge of that ancestry; and it is from their mothers that they acquire language.”⁸⁹ While Christian acknowledges that *Sula*, *Meridian* and their contemporaries are “wounded heroines,” she is not very interested in

⁸⁹Barbara Christian, “Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women’s Fiction” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. by Majorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 241.

the ways in which the maternal language itself can function as an abrasive and, consequently, can compound the wound's trauma. But it is precisely this conceptualization of the wounding maternal voice that rivets *Corregidora*.

The narrative's construction of the maternal voice suggests that the transmission of violent stories can itself enact a kind of psychic and emotional violation on the listener that replicates the original acts of brutality when such stories are not mitigated by parallel narratives of resistance and when presented in linguistic registers that echo the primary economies of violation. The novel's development of Great Gram's history situates her at the center of this exploration. As Great Gram plots her escape from slavery, she resolves to take "evidence" with her, fearing that Brazilian institutions would attempt to erase that country's violence against its enslaved black population. She carries a photograph of her enslaver, Corregidora, so that "afterward when evil come I wanted something to point to and say 'that's what evil look like'" (12). She also takes her pregnant daughter whose own daughter and granddaughter will be instructed to "make generations" in order to reproduce more visual testament—among them light skin and long, minimally textured hair—of white male sexual brutality.⁹⁰ And, finally, Great Gram carries her memories

⁹⁰*Corregidora*, like many other African American texts, deliberates on the painful irony of how such visible indications of multigenerational sexual violence against black women emerge as signs of their possession—or lack—of beauty within African American communities. Ursa and the other black women with whom she interacts understand that these physical attributes—which Great Gram herself identifies as a "scar" (72)—mark her as beautiful and, therefore, a potential sexual rival. When Ursa returns to her hometown after a considerable absence, other women immediately view her as a threat to their own position within the community's heterosexual economy: "'Who's that? Some new bitch from out of town going be trying to take everybody's husband away from them?'" Her mother's assurances that it was only "my baby" who had come for a visit notwithstanding, Ursa is rejected as a "red-headed heifer" (73). But the novel also

explores the veneration of light skin outside the context of women's sexual rivalries in its representation of Sal Cooper who reveals to Ursa that her extended maternal family abandoned her mother because "she came out the darkest." That Sal does not "know what they look like"; that her "Mama probably wouldn't even know them now" and that, in the aftermath of her family's abandonment, her "mother married a light man so that her children could have light skin and good hair" underscore the narrative's condensed but searing construction of internalized epidermal fetishism and its related traumas of familial dispossession and communal rupture (70).

The personal, familial, and communal legacy of the color caste system that slavery's symbolic economies and material institutions created and that, tragically, too many African Americans adopted continue to form a central concern in recent narratives, notably Toni Morrison's 1997 novel, *Paradise*. Morrison's story explores the multigenerational "ramifications" of this color division on the communities of Haven and Ruby, Oklahoma, which were founded by the original "Eight-rock" families and their descendants after the Civil War and World War II, respectively. Eight-rock refers to the "deep deep level in the coal mines," an apt, if secret, description of the "Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them." The 8-rocks' original rejection in the post-Civil War period by "blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits" instigates the creation of a "haven" for the outcasts and into which only a very few who are not "eight-rock" are tolerated, if not welcomed. *Paradise* decisively connects the twentieth-century consequences of the almost inviolate "blood rule" that dictates excessive intramarriage among the 8-rock families and that structures an unrelenting tradition of patriarchal dominance to the first traumatic "Disallowing," a "new separation" for the former slaves: "light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. Serious enough that their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men would be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters. The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain." Traumatized and enraged by this internecine rejection, the 8-rocks carry this "scar tissue" into the twentieth century and, in turn, spurn all African Americans whose physical features reveal signs of "racial tampering." The resulting insularity means that, in the aftermath of World War II, when Haven's returning soldiers learned of the routine assaults and lynchings of black veterans by "gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy," they "recognized the Disallowing, Part Two." "And just as the original wayfarers never sought another colored townsite after being cold-shouldered at the first, this generation joined no organization, fought no civil battle," instead "consolidat[ing] the 8-rock blood, and haughty as ever, moved farther west" in order to establish the town of Ruby. This misguided attempt at the creation of a color-defined "paradise" can be maintained only by the repudiation of dissenters, transgressors and outsiders, resulting in an isolated, socially conservative and politically disengaged community whose "Fathers" would destroy—as late as in 1973—any threat in order to maintain their "blood rules." *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 192-203. For Morrison, any allegiance—whether from dark- or light-skinned people—to a caste system that was

which she obsessively recites in order to nurture her rage as well as to transmit her history to her descendants:

She told the same story over and over again.... It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger. Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped and held my waist again (11).

Great-Gram's compulsive recitations and physical agitation, which *Corregidora* marks as hysterical symptoms of her trauma, enable her to transform her painful past into what seems to be for her a self-sustaining, always-angry present.⁹¹ But Ursa's recollection

founded on black women's sexual violation and that was deployed in order to create hierarchical divisions among African Americans can never function as a source of collective empowerment.

⁹¹It is inconceivable to me that, given the centrality of the womb throughout the text, *Corregidora* is not in some ways an extended "signification" on the classical and psychoanalytic meanings of "hysteria." The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates its medical ("pathological") definition of hysteria to early nineteenth-century understandings of the condition as "a functional disturbance of the nervous system, characterized by such disorders as anesthesia, hyperesthesia, convulsions, etc. And usually attended with emotional disturbances...." This definition itself has its roots in the seventeenth-century identification of "hysterics" as women who were "suffering in the womb" (*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Volume 1*: Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 1363. Moreover, the ascendancy of Freudian Psychoanalysis, particularly the psychiatrist's theory that "sexual experiences in childhood...must therefore be recognized...as being the traumas which lead to a hysterical reaction to events at puberty and to the development of hysterical symptoms" frames *Corregidora*'s characterization of the traces of Great Gram's trauma. "The Aetiology of Hysteria" in *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 1989, p. 104. Jones' elaborate "play" on these received meanings indicate her insistence on the racial and historical specificity of her intervention within this discursive tradition. In short, slavery's traumatization of black women, in part through its simultaneous denigration and appropriation of their wombs, has produced hysterics whose *conscious* memories of their

emphasizes that this compulsion can make the primary victim insensible to the possibly traumatizing effects of the story on the listener, a troubling situation when the auditor is only “five years old” (14). Because, repeatedly, Ursa “was made to touch [her] past at an early age,” finding “it on [her] mother’s tiddies” and in her mothers’ voices, it is as though she, too, becomes Corregidora’s direct, if secondary, victim.⁹² The “old man still howls inside [her],” entirely invading her psychic life. In one particularly horrific dream, Corregidora is at once the incestuous figure of a son to whom she has given birth and the father who rapes her because “those who have fucked their daughters would not hesitate to fuck their own mothers” (77).

One of the most striking features of Jones’ novel is the sexually graphic language it deploys in order to illustrate the ways in which sex and sexual violence often define black women’s lives—which, perhaps, explains its improbable characterization as a

brutalization manifest in psychosomatic symptoms that reveal their awareness of such trauma—if not mechanisms of healing.

⁹²This portrayal of nursing as not only the provision of maternal nourishment and love but also as the conduit through which a mother transmits her history to her daughter evokes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, another novel that grapples with the ways in which slavery’s traumas shape maternal identities and filial relationships. While Great-Gram obsessively talks about her past, however, *Beloved*’s maternal protagonists, Sethe and Baby Suggs, deem theirs “unspeakable.” My final chapter on infanticide will focus on Morrison’s 1987 narrative but here, briefly, I invoke Sethe’s second daughter, Denver, who “took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister.” Born during her mother’s escape, Denver has no direct experience of slavery yet she, like Ursa, has inherited its scars through her ingestion of nursing milk. In one of Morrison’s earlier novels, *Song of Solomon* (1977), lactation figures prominently in the incestuous sexualization of Ruth Dead’s relationship with her son, Milkman, whom she nursed until she must avert her eyes in order “to avoid seeing his legs dangling almost to the floor” (New York: Plume 1987), p. 13. Such inscriptions accentuate some of the ways in which African American women writers create a symbolic episteme of black maternity that complicates assumptive associations between mothering and nurturing—associations which often do not engage the complex histories and lives of women-as-mothers.

“bizarre, romantic story.”⁹³ The use of this linguistic register underscores the effects of the maternal participation in and adoption of discursive economies of violence upon their children, a figurative symptom of the women’s trauma. Ursa’s mothers (I use the plural because Ursa refers to herself as “their” daughter and they often do not make distinctions among themselves)⁹⁴ seem to believe that the history of sexual violence they wish her to know can only be incontestably reconstructed through the graphic, debasing language that “Corregidora taught Great Gram. He taught her to use the kind of words she did” (76). My point here is not that Ursa’s mothers should employ a delicate and evasive discourse to reconstruct this history but rather that Jones deploys this language in order to reveal the violent interconnectedness of power and sex. Because Great Gram’s and Grandmama’s sexualities always had been constituted within this degrading, hierarchical matrix, they remain incapable of imagining an alternative discourse that might reconstruct their history in a manner that might not reproduce the degradation they have endured. Since the primary indeed only stories the older Corregidora women recite are those in which they and other black women were “pussies” that were “fucked” in “some kind of sex show,” along with accounts of black women who were “slapped...across the cunt till it was bluer than black,” Ursa struggles to conceive of her own sexuality and sexual relationships outside those terms of domination and victimization (125, 67). Accordingly, *Corregidora* constructs the sexual relations in Ursa’s two marriages as structures of tense negotiations with two men who believe that “a man always says I want

⁹³*Black Women Writers at Work*, Ed. by Claudia Tate. (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 1990), p. 89.

⁹⁴This lack of distinction speaks to incest’s dissolution of personal and familial boundaries.

to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked” (89). The sexually graphic discourse the couples use are less articulations of erotic language that romantic partners might engage to create mutual sexual pleasure than they are symbolic markers of power struggles to determine “who’s on top” in the bedroom as well as signs of Ursa’s fight for autonomy in other realms. Stressing this comparison between Corregidora’s white, patriarchal domination and Mutt’s temporally present assertions of black, masculinist prerogatives, Jones creates a kind of cross-racial, same-gender ventriloquism in which Mutt mimics the same cliometric language of ownership that Corregidora had used on his plantation: “‘your pussy’s a little gold piece, ain’t it, Urs? My little gold piece’” (60). Ursa’s terse affirmation, “yes,” without elaboration or repetition of Mutt’s monetary imagery suggests her acceptance of the established sexual order but it also signals an emerging rejection of that order.

A full-throated repudiation begins to take shape when Mutt attempts to extend his “ownership” from their bedroom to Ursa’s artistry, her musical performances. Interestingly, the novel indicates that although Ursa must fight to claim her sexual autonomy and struggle to “bear witness” outside a black maternal reproductive economy, she never hesitates to defend her artistic and financial independence nor the potentially regenerative powers of singing the blues. Initially, however, she does not understand that her powerful blues singing—her participation in and reproduction of a black musical tradition—can function as a more liberatory testimony of her mothers’ and her own histories than biological motherhood ever could, bound as the latter has been by coercion

and abuse.⁹⁵ When Mutt urges Ursa to renounce her singing after their marriage because “he married [her] so he could support [her],” he mistakenly equates his own desire to establish masculine dominance with what he presumes will be Ursa’s correlating wish for feminine subordination, exemplified by financial dependence. Jones allows her protagonist to reject this premise in the novel’s first paragraph with an authoritative first-person declaration of her desire and need for autonomy: “I said I sang because it was something I had to do but he never would understand that” (3). Although Ursa intuitively feels that her art could ensure her creation of this independence, she first must fully confront and comprehend the context of the maternal imperative to “make generations” in the wake of her hysterectomy. Only then can she consciously embrace her singing as a powerfully expressive mode that empowers her to remember and represent her maternal history as well as create her own distinct place within that history.

Corregidora emphasizes that Ursa’s revision of her maternal history cannot be entirely divorced from the legacies of that history by drawing a link between Ursa’s blues singing and her “Grandmama’s old blues records” (146). Unlike her daughter and mother, Ursa’s own mother fears the blues, rejecting them as the “devil’s music coming out of [Ursa’s] mouth” while she “sat in church trying to praise God” (ibid). The mother’s admonition against singing notwithstanding, the women would listen to the blues because “Mama would say that listening to the blues and singing them ain’t the same” (103). If, as Angela Davis maintains, the blues served as one of the primary

⁹⁵*Corregidora* seems rather skeptical about the empowering potential of mothers and the maternal role. Not only biological but surrogate mothering, too, receives its critical scrutiny, most emphatically in its characterization of Cat.

expressive modes through which working-class African Americans—singers and audiences—interpreted and affirmed their “social and psychic afflictions and aspirations,” then Ursa’s embrace of singing the blues—despite her mother’s unrelenting objections—indicates her intuitive grasp of the rich potential the blues offer for interpreting her own life.⁹⁶ Such a necessary interpretation can take place only when Ursa integrates her own experiences with Great Gram’s and Gram’s “monstrous” recollections of their lives with Corregidora as well as her mother’s “own real and terrible and lonely and dark memory” of her relationship with Ursa’s father (101, 103). Finally, in her “late thirties,” Ursa insists that her own mother recognize that “Corregidora’s never been enough” for her and that her mother’s “private memory” of her relationship with her father is an essential part of the familial history Ursa needs to know before she could “make some kind of life for [her]self” (129, 111). Ursa now understands that her incorporation and interpretation of her maternal history must go beyond the familiar and wounding words of her mothers’ “spoken” lives in order to generate transformational meaning for her own (108). Her rendition of their life stories must create signification “in the tune, in the whole way I drew out a song. In the way my breath moved, in my whole voice” (103). Various represented as “beautiful,” “strained,” “screaming,” “hard,” and “new,” Ursa’s voice must create its own song, one that pays homage to her foremothers’ but that also composes new refrains “with different lyrics” (182).

⁹⁶*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books (1998), p. 33.

CHAPTER 3

Murdering One's Own: Trauma and Infanticide in Twentieth-century African American Women's Literature.

In a stunning act of self-defined protection, a mother kills her child. The child is a boy or a girl; a newborn, a toddler, or an adolescent on the eve of sexual awakening. For the mother whose subjectivity has been formed in a world of sexual and racial terror and whose sense of her identity unravels after a culminating blow of personal, familial or communal violation, murdering her child marks her assertion of maternal autonomy and, paradoxically, her will to nurture. This recurring theme of black maternal infanticide in twentieth-century African American women's literary texts forms the focus of the following two chapters. For my study's attention to selected—not strictly chronological—depictions of violated motherhood in African American women's writing, these representations of infanticide extend and reconfigure the symbolics of maternal denigration and its attendant contestation that began with the antebellum inscription of black maternal separation and dispossession in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and that continues in the interrogation of sexual abuse and incest in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975). Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, of course, brought this disturbing configuration of black familial rupture to the forefront of literary scholarship and public discourse. But, quiet as it's kept, several earlier African American women writers, notably playwrights during the first four decades of the twentieth century, already had inscribed maternal infanticide as a provocative response to and possible strategy of

resistance against racial and sexual terror by which a black woman terminates, in the most definitive of terms, her own subject position as a mother.

Before Morrison and the publication of *Beloved*, Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Shirley Graham examined infanticide in their own symbolic explorations of black maternal violation and resistance. Grimké's, Johnson's and Graham's treatments of child-murder in their plays—and in one of Grimké's short stories—anticipate and lay the representational foundation for Morrison's more extensive interrogation of infanticide's initial trauma and its personal, familial and communal aftermath. Indeed, while the earlier works end with the dramatization of the child's death, *Beloved*, one realizes, primarily concerns itself with the *post-traumatic* consequences of this violent rupture on the surviving community, insisting on raising issues about internecine violence committed within the context of racial terrorization that the texts written forty to sixty years before were either unwilling or unable to confront. *Beloved's* interrogation of issues such as guilt, betrayal, complicity and the viability of black selfhood, specifically black maternal subjectivity, I argue, relates not only to Morrison's re-imagination of the antebellum and Reconstruction traumatizing eras of her novel's setting. Importantly, too, her symbolic engagement with infanticide must be situated within the particular discursive economies of blackness and womanhood that emerged with the political and cultural developments of the mid-late twentieth century, namely the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Feminist movements and the reactionary responses to them. Such a double contextualization of *Beloved*—together with comparable attention to the socio-historical conditions in which the earlier

texts were written and produced—enables our comprehension of the limitations and possibilities of the texts’ configurations of maternal trauma and resistance.

Read together, the infanticidal texts I analyze foreground a significant pattern of representation visible in the relationship between the particular regime of racial and sexual terror within which the black mother’s identity has been shaped and the gender of the child she kills.⁹⁷ Accordingly, in Grimké’s play *Rachel* (1916) and short story, “The Closing Door” (1919) as well as Johnson’s *Safe* (ca. 1929), texts which examine the post-traumatic effects of lynching, the systematic, ritualized executions of thousands of African Americans—the vast majority of whom were men and boys—by white mobs during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the earlier decades of the twentieth, the mother kills a male child. Conversely, the mother kills a female child in Graham’s play *It’s Mornin’* (1940) and *Beloved*, texts that undertake a figurative return to slavery, lynching’s institutionalized progenitor of racial discipline and terrorization.⁹⁸

This recognition of the alternative foregrounding of gender in these texts does not deny that many African American women were lynched nor does it make an absurd claim that only black women were exploited under slavery’s regime. Rather, the utilizations of these alternative narrative strategies accentuate the texts’ contention that

⁹⁷While many theorists have warned against the conflation of biological sexual identity and the social and cultural significance—*gender*—ascribed to that identity, these texts make no such distinctions. From the moment of birth, the black child’s body immediately enters an indisputable gendered economy and its associated regulations of selfhood that both the black community and its surrounding advocates of white supremacy comprehend.

⁹⁸I paraphrase Walter White who wrote that “lynching, like its parent, slavery, has become more or less fixed in American psychology.” *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929), p. 196.

examinations of racial disciplinary protocols cannot be divorced from a concomitant consideration of gender and that, furthermore, within varying social contexts, there arise gender-specific modes of racial violation and, consequently, different sets of anticipated fears for the black child—fears that are inextricably linked to a child's gender. If we remember Linda Brent's declaration that "slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women" because of their routine sexual violation, we are not surprised that both *It's Mornin'*'s protagonist, Cissie, and *Beloved*'s Sethe kill female children since both mothers commit the infanticides to keep their daughters "safe" from the gender-specific sexual degradation each had suffered herself. Such quotidian degradation functions as a central preoccupation in the authors' configuration of slavery's attempted annihilation of black female subjectivity. Cissie, who as an adolescent girl had been raped repeatedly by the plantation's overseer, kills her adolescent daughter, Millie, before she can be taken further South by the slave trader who already had begun to leer at her "lak a beast what's scented fresh, young meat,"⁹⁹ thereby preventing what she expects to be an intergenerational repetition of sexual violence and its subsequent trauma. Similarly, Sethe determines to kill the two-year old daughter who had been born in slavery because, "handled...like a cow" when she was subjected to Schoolteacher's phrenological and proto-eugenics' experiments, "I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too."¹⁰⁰ Having to look no further than at her own sexual and sexualized degradation as a young woman,

⁹⁹*It's Mornin'* in *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women From the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Edited and Compiled. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), p. 89.

¹⁰⁰*Beloved*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 200-203.

each enslaved mother determines that her own self-authorized murder of her daughter is preferable to slavery's inevitable brutality.

The connection that Grimké and Johnson draw between gender and lynching—in which the mother kills her son in order to prevent his expected torture and execution by white mobs—underscores the authors' insistence on recognizing and representing black men as the overwhelming victims of this particular weapon of racial supremacist violence, thereby emphasizing the interlocking relationship between the development of their art and its historical context.¹⁰¹ Both Grimké and Johnson, who were born in 1875 and circa 1880 respectively, came of age during lynching's ascendancy; both were involved in anti-lynching campaigns; and both contributed to the outpouring of anti-lynching expressive culture that was coeval with the other prodigious cultural

¹⁰¹According to one estimate, 66 black women were lynched between 1889 and 1922. While one does not minimize the horror and pain that this number signifies, the playwrights' male-gendered emphasis underscores their participation in creating what critic Judith Stephens calls the "dynamic cultural text" of lynching's history. That is, the plays sought to both represent, reflect and influence the racial conditions of their historical moment. Therefore, the playwrights depict black males as the direct murder victims of the lynchers. Even within the context of lynching's routine brutality, the particularly horrific lynching of Mary Turner in 1918 became the rare historical lynching of a black woman that African American artists seemed compelled to give figurative expression. After shooting, hanging and burning the eight-month pregnant Turner, the mob was not satisfied. One of its perpetrators carved open her belly, removed the fetus and killed it by stomping on its head. The murders of Turner and her child shaped Meta Fuller's 1919 sculpture, *Mary Turner (A Silent Protest)* and Grimké's 1920 short story, "Goldie." See Judith L. Stephens' "Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s," *African American Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), p. 656 and *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, eds. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 14.

productions that came to define the New Negro Movement that, later, would be known as the Harlem Renaissance.¹⁰²

Like their antebellum predecessors, Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs, Johnson and Grimké situate their figurative contestation of gendered racial violation within a discourse of maternity. Specifically commenting on Grimké's exclusive use of young,

¹⁰² Although Grimké and Johnson rarely focused on racial violence in their poetry, unlike some of their male contemporaries like Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, lynching was a common subject in their plays and short fiction. As Carolivia Herron affirms, however, lynching "is an extremely powerful theme when presented in [Grimké's] poetry. These include "Trees" and "Beware When He Awakes." *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, Ed. Carolivia Herron. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 4. In addition to *Safe*, Johnson's plays on lynching include *A Sunday Morning in the South*, *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* and the two recently recovered plays *And Yet They Paused* and *A Bill to be Passed*. These latter two, written in 1938 but never produced, were published for the first time in Judith L. Stephens 2006 anthology of Johnson's extant plays. Both dramas juxtapose a halting Congressional debate of federal anti-lynching legislation with a black community's traumatically helpless experience of the lynching of one its members. The two plays differ in their ending only. In *And Yet they Paused*, upon learning that "another atrocious lynching has occurred down in Mississippi" while "we have been idly arguing here, in meaningless delay," a congressman announces that "this bill *must be passed!*" but the "curtain descends" before any definitive action is taken. In *A Bill to Be Passed*, the playwright presents an alternative ending in her dramatization of the House of Representatives' passage of the legislation, an act that emboldens the black delegate to declare "Then ON TO THE SENATE," the final spoken words of the play. Although *A Bill to Be Passed* concludes more optimistically than *And Yet they Paused*, Johnson's dramatizations of Congressional wrangling and stalemate throughout both plays symbolically recreate the failure of the federal government to establish any national anti-lynching laws despite years of persistent agitation by such figures as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, W. E. B. DuBois, and Walter White as well as by organizations that included the NAACP, the National Association of Colored Women, and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Johnson herself was a member of the Writers League Against Lynching, an organization of "writers, editors, and publishers who joined together to protest lynching and work for the passage of a federal antilynching bill." *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*. Ed. Judith L. Stephens. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 38. The United States Congress never passed a federal anti-lynching bill. Besides "The Closing Door," Grimké represented her pronounced concern with lynching in three other short stories: "Blackness," "Black is, as Black Does," and, noted above, "Goldie." Her lynching plays are *Mara* and *Rachel*.

maternal figures in what she calls the author's "domestic tragedies," Claudia Tate observes that Grimké "relies on the anguish of repudiated or devastated motherhood to give expression to racial protest."¹⁰³ Grimké herself emphasized her belief in the political efficacy of maternal protest. In an attempt to defend herself against charges of advocating black "race suicide" after the production and publication (1916 and 1920 respectively) of her play, *Rachel*, in which the eponymous protagonist rejects motherhood after she realizes black children's persistent vulnerability to racism,

¹⁰³ *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 219. Although Tate acknowledges that the "racial despair" of the early decades of the twentieth century might suffice to explain "Grimké's repudiated maternal discourse," she remains somewhat perplexed that Grimké routinely connected this repudiation to lynching. Thus she "speculate[s] that had it not been for Grimké's obsession with rendering lynching in practically all of her stories and their attendant pathetic repudiations of motherhood, her writing might have had a broader creative plateau on which to develop" (p. 217). Although I agree with Tate that Grimké's particular "ambivalence about motherhood" should also be examined within the emergent discourse of the "new woman" and its accompanying concerns of professional, economic and social autonomy, I do not accept the necessity of marginalizing the racial imperative behind Grimké's artistic (that is, symbolic) intervention into the larger African American contestation of discursive and material racial and sexual violence, especially lynching, in that particular era. I have concluded that Tate remains bewildered about Grimké's "obsession" with lynching not because she wishes to minimize the effects of that terrorism on African Americans nor because she fails to comprehend its possible effects on the (relatively) economically and socially privileged Grimké. Rather, Tate's determination to situate Grimké's maternal discourses only in oppositional relation to the "heroic maternity" of black women's antebellum narratives and the "maternal confidence that characterized [the] post-Reconstruction domestic novels" that constitute the focus of much of her study, undermines a realization that Grimké and her maternal texts must be compared not only to their predecessors but, necessarily, to their contemporaries as well. When not examined in isolation—as is the case in Tate's final chapter—or only against the writings of her immediate expressive predecessors but also placed alongside that of her peers such as Johnson and Burrill, Grimké's connection between lynching and rejected motherhood seems less incomprehensible. Instead this paradigmatic relationship emerges as a significant instance of a broader contemporary contestation of pervasive racial violence against African Americans.

Grimké left on record one of the most forceful contemporary indictments of white women's complicity in racial oppression:

...[t]he white women of this country are about the worst enemies with which the colored race has to contend. My belief was then that if I could find a vulnerable point in their armor, if I could reach their hearts... they might become, at least, less inimical and possibly friendly. Did they have a vulnerable point and if so, what was it?

The playwright concludes that "motherhood" provides the only opening for interracial empathy and "sisterhood," thereby explaining her maternal focus:

If anything can make all women sisters underneath their skins. It is motherhood. If then, I could make the white women of this country see, feel, understand just what their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, [and] sons were having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, ... a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won.¹⁰⁴

While more openly denunciatory of white women's allegiances in the beginning, the greater part of Grimké's exhortation recalls Jacobs' prefatory—and, indeed, narrative-long—"desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South."¹⁰⁵ Indeed, in its germinal role in establishing the anti-lynching theatrical genre to which subsequent plays would contribute their own

¹⁰⁴“‘Rachel,’ The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis by the Author in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*. Ed. Carolivia Herron. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 414.

¹⁰⁵*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, p. 1. Claudia Tate makes a similar observation about Grimké's and Jacobs' presumed audiences in *Domestic Allegories*, p. 218.

enunciations, *Rachel* situates itself and the genre in the “protest tradition initiated by antislavery plays” and, I would add, other forms of abolitionist texts.¹⁰⁶

Although she had concluded that white women in general were black people’s “worst enemies,” Grimké seems unable to relinquish—or deems it ideologically strategic to rely upon—a sentimental construction of motherhood that reifies parturition and child-rearing as universal female experiences that could pierce the “armour” of enemies and transform them into allies. Despite her recognition that black and white women occupy dramatically different social positions and that white women themselves—not only the male figures who embody the authority of white male patriarchy and supremacy—were powerful racial antagonists, her ahistorical conceptualization of maternity presents it as a transcendent category that might mitigate against material racial realities.

Contemporaneously, Grimké’s ideological appeal through the motif of motherhood echoes through a letter that Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote to Arna Bontemps, another Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist. Although Johnson, here, speaks specifically about her volume of poems, *Bronze: A Book of Verse*, her explanation’s relevance to the maternal focus in *Safe* becomes clear once we remember that Johnson was working on her lynching plays when *Bronze* was published first in 1922. In this 1941 letter, Johnson recounts the deliberate racial emphasis in her second published volume of poetry:

¹⁰⁶Judith L. Stephens, “Art, Activism, and Uncompromising Attitude in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Lynching Plays,” *African American Review*, Vol. 39, No.1/2 (Spring-Summer, 2005), p. 87. Here, Stephens quotes James Hatch’s conclusion that “the antilynching dramas, comparable only to the passionate appeal in antislavery plays, became the second form of American protest drama.”

‘So I wrote *Bronze*—it is entirely racial and one section deals entirely with motherhood—that motherhood that has as its basic note—black children born to the world’s displeasure.’¹⁰⁷

Johnson was sufficiently sensitive to charges that her first book of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman*, ignored racial issues that she wrote *Bronze* in order to demonstrate her racial consciousness, prove her racial solidarity and, therefore, silence her critics. What remains significant for me is that although she had divided the poems into nine sections, of which “motherhood” was only one, Johnson believed that maternity had been so central to her creative exploration of racial issues that she emphasized its singularity almost twenty years later. Moreover, her letter to Bontemps stresses that her exposure to racial supremacy had produced a conception of black motherhood as fundamentally embattled.¹⁰⁸

Johnson’s letter provides insight into another explanation for the inextricable connection she and Grimké drew between maternity and lynching, namely the gender politics that shaped anti-racist mobilization within black communities. As Johnson’s comments to Bontemps reveal, her poetry—and Grimké’s—often was deemed apolitically feminine and insufficiently attentive to the contemporary project of racial uplift. Their well-known anti-lynching activism did not shield them from charges of “softness” on the race question which, in the period’s context of prominent discursive

¹⁰⁷Gloria T. Hull quotes this letter in her chapter-length study of Johnson. *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 160.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

practices, meant public focus on the violence against black men. This understandable attention to black men's vulnerabilities was accompanied by an unnecessarily deafening silence on the violence, especially sexual violence, against black women or on other woman-centered issues. An interrogation of the vagaries of black motherhood, however, could serve as an unthreatening disruption of such gendered-inflected silence. The centrality of the maternal subject in Johnson's and Grimké's lynching plays, then, reveals their recognition of a sanctioned figurative terrain on which they could politicize black women's violation—even as they simultaneously dramatized lynching's horror for black men.

Johnson's *Safe* and Grimké's *Rachel* and "The Closing Door" resituate lynching within a discourse of embattled black maternal subjectivity in order to represent the world's or, more specifically, the United States' "displeasure" with a growing population of nonenslaved black people—who increasingly were demanding their recognition as equal citizens. This racial loathing could not have been more violently expressed than in the torture, castration, raping, dismemberment, hanging and burning of thousands of black bodies that constituted a spectacular pastime for southern white mobs and a fair number of northern ones as well.¹⁰⁹ This grotesque phenomenon gave rise to collective

¹⁰⁹In the third of her three anti-lynching pamphlets published between 1892 and 1900, Ida B. Wells, who relied on the statistics of white newspapers in order to avoid charges of racial chauvinism and propagandist hyperbole, estimated that 2,533 black people were "murdered by mobs" between 1882 and 1899. *Mob Rule in New Orleans: Robert Charles and His Fight to the Death. The Story of his Life. Burning Human Beings Alive. Other Lynching Statistics*. Reprinted in *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. Ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster. (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), p. 206. Using Tuskegee University's archives as the primary source for his historical research, Philip Dray concludes that through 1944, 3,417 African

black political activism perhaps unseen since the abolitionist movement.¹¹⁰ It also formed the thematic and ideological crux of much contemporary black artistic production, to which Johnson and Grimké were prolific contributors.¹¹¹

Americans were *recorded* to have been lynched and that “not until 1952 did a year pass without a single recorded lynching.” *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), p. viii.

¹¹⁰One cannot overstate the ways in which this form of racial terrorism shaped black public discourse and gave rise to both African American and interracial political organizations. As early as 1887 T. Thomas Fortune’s founding of the Afro-American League identified anti-lynching agitation as a primary concern. In 1892, after some prominent, middle-class, African American club women invited Ida B. Wells to speak before them at Lyric Hall in New York about her investigative work on lynching, they collected five hundred dollars for her, most of which she used to publish *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, her first anti-lynching pamphlet. In her preface to *Southern Horrors*, Wells credits this cooperative activism, explaining that while “requests have come from all parts of the country” to publicize her findings, she had not had the financial means to do so previously. Only the “noble effort of the ladies of New York and Brooklyn Oct. 5 have enabled me to comply with this request and give the world a true, unvarnished account of the causes of lynch law in the South.” *Southern Horrors* ..., p. 24, 50.

Among civil rights issues, lynching was a paramount concern for the activists who founded the interracial National Association of the Advancement of Colored People in 1909. Eight years later, the NAACP was instrumental in organizing the Negro Silent Protest Parade along Fifth Avenue in New York City. Over “ten thousand black adults and children marched... More than twice that number of blacks, joined by sympathetic or curious whites, lined the street.” While almost no word was spoken by these protesters, a circulated leaflet explained that “we march because we are thoroughly opposed to Jim-Crow Cars, Segregation, Discrimination, Disenfranchisement, LYNCHING and the host of evils that are forced on us.” Quoted in *At the Hands of Persons Unknown*, p. 236-37. Toni Morrison offers a fictional account of this march in her 1992 novel *Jazz*.

¹¹¹In her book-length study on lynching, Trudier Harris examines primarily black male writers’ depiction of lynching throughout most of the twentieth century, including some contemporaries of Johnson and Grimké: Sutton Griggs, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Claude McKay and Richard Wright. *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). Other contemporary African American women playwrights whose lynching plays do not depict an infanticide include: Mary Powell Burrill, Regina Anderson Andrews and May Miller. The latter’s dramatic works, along

Black women-as-mothers—not black men and boys—become the primary interested and violated subjects of these particular symbolic representations of racial terrorization. These women writers employ what might be called a maternal aesthetic of racial protest that recalls the antebellum narrative strategies of Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson, constructing the black mother as the central figure at the crossroads between white violence and black violation. In other words, as the figure that has been primarily invested with the symbolic and material associations of black reproduction and lineage in the United States—we need only recall the legal imperative that the “child shall follow the condition of the mother”—the African American mother comes to represent the primary locus of black trauma and pain. In a system of transgenerational racial supremacy and oppression, the black mother’s reproductive capabilities signify systemic black violation: she bears and, in the majority of cases, nurtures the future victims of racial violence. Thus Grimké’s and Johnson’s texts articulate a connection between lynching and the black mother’s violated subjectivity because, as one might say, the “fruit of her womb” becomes the “strange fruit”¹¹² of southern trees.

with that of some white women playwrights, have been anthologized in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*. Eds. Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

¹¹²Blues and jazz vocalist Billie Holiday’s 1939 haunting recording of “Strange Fruit,” written by white poet Lewis Allan, is perhaps the most well known lynching text among cultural scholars and wider audiences alike. But the title’s horrific figurative resonance for describing what Ida B. Wells called a “human holocaust” also led Pearl Primus to choreograph a modern dance that was performed to a spoken poetic rendition of “Strange Fruit” in 1943 to protest lynching, according to Kathy Perkins in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, p.17. And Lillian Smith, a white Southern writer, gave the same title to both her 1944 novel and 1945 play in her attempts to explore this second “peculiar institution” in the United States.

Before I analyze *Safe* and “The Closing Door,” the two lynching texts in which a black mother commits an explicit infanticide, I will examine Grimké’s 1916 play *Rachel* which does not dramatize a definitive on-stage infanticide but which establishes such a profound figurative apparatus in which lynching is inextricably connected to violated and negated black maternity that, I argue, it sets the stage for the categorical infanticidal texts that follow its production and publication.¹¹³

For historians of drama, *Rachel* remains significant because it is the “first non-musical written, produced, and publicly performed [play] by African Americans for which we have an extant script.” For scholars interested in the development of lynching dramas, *Rachel* is the “earliest known example of a full-length drama written in the anti-lynching tradition.”¹¹⁴ Other critics have noted the play’s “striking sensitivity to the special way racism and sexism affect the black woman” and its depiction of the destructive effects of racism and the lynching on a black family.¹¹⁵ For my study, *Rachel* establishes its germinal role with the eponymous character’s declaration at the end of Act I that “it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth” after her mother haltingly and painfully recounts the lynchings of Rachel’s father and half-brother.¹¹⁶ The

¹¹³Before it was published by the Cornhill Company in 1920, *Rachel* was staged in three amateur productions, beginning with a 1916 staging at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School in Washington, D.C. It was not professionally produced. Claudia Tate speculates that Grimké might have decided to publish it “as a means of encouraging its widest possible dissemination” when she realized how daunting it would be secure funding for theatrical productions (p. 210).

¹¹⁴*Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, p. 24.

¹¹⁵Margaret Wilkerson, Ed., *9 Plays by Black Women* (New York: Mentor Press, 1986), p. xvi. *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, p. 25.

¹¹⁶Before the sentimentally named Mrs. Loving recalls what she clearly identifies as the trauma of her life, *Rachel* unfolds according to two other criteria that Judith L. Stephens

dramatic shock that Rachel's announcement elicits comes from the audience's/reader's recognition that lynching's violence has such forceful reverberations and associations for African Americans that even when a past lynching event is discursively reproduced, its oral representation has the power to generate an infanticidal discourse that violates the tableau of family contentment and desired motherhood that had been created throughout most of the first act.

From the start, *Rachel* signals the connection it draws between domestic tranquility and gratified motherhood in its description of a "room scrupulously neat and clean and plainly furnished." The furnishings include "an upright piano," on top of which "music [is] neatly piled;" a tablecloth covers the dining table and "above the table is a chandelier with four gas jets enclosed by glass globes." The audience's attention is drawn also to a "bookcase full of books" and three framed reproduction works of art: French painter Jean-Francois Millet's *The Reapers* (1854), British Edward Burne-Jones' *The Golden Stairs* (1880) and Raphael's Italian Renaissance *Sistine Madonna* which he

has identified as central to the lynching plays' positioning as a distinctive sub-genre within the American theatrical tradition. The detailed staging of the Lovings' apartment constructs a domestic scene that projects "an environment of Daily Routine" which marks "the black home as an important place of education and resistance." Equally important, the juxtaposition of the brutal public act of lynching with the private, intimate atmosphere of the home creates a theatre of jarring contrasts and incongruity for those who idealize the 'American home' by equating it with an atmosphere of safety and peace." Stephens argues further that the establishment of "[a]n Alternative Medium: Music, Poetry, Prayer functions as "essential" expressive "elements that provide counterpoints to the rhythm created by the dialogue" and that—together with "props and sound effects chosen for their emotional or spiritual qualities"—create the lynching play's dramatic aesthetic. Third, Mrs. Loving's narration of her family's trauma accords with Stephens' schema which maintains that most "lynching plays by black women...involve a black woman describing, or re-creating through her words, a lynching incident that has taken place in the past or is presently occurring." *Ibid.* p. 9-10.

painted sometime between 1512-1514.¹¹⁷ Working at her sewing machine, Mrs. Loving stitches “swiftly and deftly by hand upon a waist in her lap. It is a white, beautiful thing and she sews upon it delicately.”¹¹⁸ Presented in 1916 when most African Americans were exceptionally poor and illiterate, Grimké’s visual economy constructs a scene of aspirational middle-class respectability and familiarity that would have, one imagines, appealed to the white middle-class audiences, specifically the white women, for whom

¹¹⁷The paintings function as signifiers of Grimké’s—and her characters’—familiarity with important European artistic traditions and evolution, thereby highlighting African American developing erudition and appreciation of Western cultural expressions. Yet the playwright’s particular choices signify much more if one recognizes that, once re-situated within this early twentieth-century African American home, these paintings become imbued with new racial and cultural meanings. *The Golden Stairs*, with its multiple, bare-footed and classically dressed white maidens who carry musical instruments, seems most resistant to a “black” re-signification. However, its portrayal of idealized white womanhood potentially would have had both aesthetic and ideological appeal for white audience members as well as for black audience members who accepted such standards of beauty and refinement. Millet’s mid-nineteenth century painting of peasant farmers in which the male figure in the foreground wears a hat and has his back turned to the viewer—thereby neutralizing and obscuring his racial features—would have resonated powerfully with black audiences that were only two generations out of plantation slavery. And, in the unlikely event that those audience members themselves were farmers, they would have been aware that most African Americans at the time earned their living through agricultural work, particularly share-cropping.

Finally, Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* serves as a visual background of idealized white and biblically-sanctioned motherhood against which the play’s dramatization of black maternity unfolds. The inclusion of a painting in which Mary’s embrace of the infant Jesus prefigures the pietas of his symbolic crucifixions visualizes an economy of lynching metaphors upon which other lynching texts will draw. In Regina Anderson Andrews’ *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder*, for instance, a minister implores his parishioners: “Are we going to let this terrible crime be committed in the name of justice? Are we going to let an innocent black man be crucified? (shouts of no) He needs your help. His mother and sisters add their silent plea to mine for help. His mother’s heart is bleeding. She needs her boy.” Perhaps paying explicit homage to *Rachel*, Andrews elects to name the character that speaks after this speech “Dr. Loving.” *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, p. 126.

¹¹⁸*Rachel*, Reprinted in *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, Act 1, p. 29. All citations will be attributed to this publication.

she intended her protest play.¹¹⁹ At the same time, the scene would have affirmed the ambitions of middle-class black audiences—like those who attended the plays’ three productions—while encouraging them to continue their work of “lifting as we climb” with poor African Americans.

Yet one notices almost immediately that a palpable tension unsettles the aura of domestic serenity that the decorative tableau initially establishes. Alongside the more well-preserved furnishings, a “rather shabby armchair” stakes its place. Mrs. Loving “looks worried” and “shivers slightly” as the day’s “light [fails]” and twilight descends. When Rachel enters with “her spirit of abounding life, health, joy, [and] youth,” she restores familial contentment but, at this point, the play has constructed its framework of emotional and psychological oscillation that will define its characters’ struggles to confront and resist racism’s inexorable intrusion into the domestic sanctuaries they attempt to create. Indeed, *Rachel* inaugurates the anti-lynching texts’ contention that lynching’s violence destroys virtually all distinctions between black private spaces and the public sphere precisely because not only does the violence destroy black bodies and shatter material signs of black accomplishment such as homes, schools and businesses; as importantly, the lynchers and their supporting advocates of white supremacy unleash this form of racial terror as a weapon of psychological trauma against surviving family members and members of the surrounding black communities. Lynching drama critic

¹¹⁹ According to Hazel Carby, out of a total population of approximately six and a half million in 1900, 45 percent of African Americans over age 10 were illiterate. Carby also cites research which indicates that “between 1900 and 1910, 50 percent of all black males and up to 28 percent of black females who were employed worked in agricultural production.” *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 126.

Judith Stephens emphasizes that “historians agree that lynchings served as an instrument of intimidation directed against all blacks as well as punishment for the *alleged* offender.”¹²⁰ Accordingly, the “old depression returns” to Mrs. Loving as she contemplates telling her children about the lynching of her husband and son, their father and half-brother. This new and dreadful knowledge of her family’s history transforms the “joyful” young woman into one who “looks grim enough” (Act I, 39; Act II, 46).

Before the grimness takes hold, Rachel’s joy is inextricably aligned with her maternal tendencies even though she is not yet a mother. In the first verbal exchange between mother and daughter, the younger woman explains that she has returned home later than expected because she had been playing with the “dearest, cutest, darlingest little brown baby boy you ever saw.” To which Mrs. Loving responds, “You’re not happy unless some child is trailing along in your rear” (Act I, 29). Shortly after, Rachel plays and sings the lullaby “Slumber Boat,” “raises her eyes to Raphael’s Madonna over the piano” and declares, “I think the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just ... being a mother!” When her mother gently laughs at her serious but borrowed sentimentalism, Rachel reprimands her for mocking the “sacredness” of motherhood and avers that if she “believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I’d pray to die now” (Act I, 29-33).

With the support of her brother, Tom, and mother, Rachel later adopts Jimmy, the little boy with whom she had been playing in the play’s opening act, after his parents

¹²⁰“Lynching, American Theatre, and the Preservation of a Tradition,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 9 (Winter 1997), p. 58.

conveniently die from a smallpox infection. Yet even before he becomes Rachel's son, Jimmy assumes the critical role of the young male child whose arrival disrupts almost all attempts to maintain conventional familial routines and to create domestic spaces that foster a sense of security which cannot be breached by the trauma of a current lynching or the post-traumatic memories of one that was committed in the past. When Rachel introduces Jimmy to her family, "Mrs. Loving turns expectantly to see the child" but "suddenly without word or warning, her body stiffens; her hands grip her sewing convulsively; her eyes stare. She makes no sound" (Act I, 36). Through her dramatization of Mrs. Loving's paralysis and spasms, Grimké inscribes what I would call a visual somatic vocabulary of maternal trauma that expands when Johnson's pregnant Liza becomes "wild-eyed" and "continues to shiver and shake" as Sam Hosea is lynched in *Safe*; in Agnes' "strange, stony stillness" and "tortured, hungry face" once she gives birth to a son in the aftermath of her brother's lynching in "The Closing Door; in the "strange beauty [that] illumines [Cissie's] black, gaunt face" and transforms it into a "mask of ebony, with set, unseeing eyes" after she cuts her daughter's throat in *It's Mornin'*; and that culminates in *Beloved's* Sethe's numbness and seeming blindness after she kills her young daughter: "But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn't have any [eyes]. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind" (150).

According to Kalí Tal's insightful examination of what she identifies as twentieth-century "Literature of Trauma," including that which emerged out of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, the Vietnam War and "Incest Survivor Narratives," "the

survivor sees always with two sets of eyes, and in one set—on an endless loop—play the horrors of war, terrible memories superimposed on the most commonplace event.”¹²¹

Tal’s observation offers a formulation that enables us to understand that although Mrs. Loving has never talked about her husband’s and son’s lynchings—as she later explains and regrets—she, as a surviving witness of lynching’s trauma, has lived constantly with the memory of the violence—which Jimmy’s jarring resemblance to her dead son triggers—that she now finds both psychically and physically impossible to suppress. The play does not indicate that Mrs. Loving’s trauma has been repressed—that she has partially or entirely forgotten the event or its details—and Mrs. Loving never makes such a claim. Rather, she has chosen not to speak about the lynching to her children until the play’s present out of apprehensive fear that her articulated representations would generate new traumas for them. The terrifying memories rupture Mrs. Loving’s customary composure in her surviving children’s presence. Both the sudden rupture and her children’s observation of her temporary somatic disability convince the older woman that she can no longer conceal the narrative of their family’s violation because they are “old enough” and it is her “duty” to transmit the family’s history.

Mrs. Loving’s account of the lynchings finally explains her silence about the missing men in the family and, for Tom, functions as an inspiration to “be something now” so that he might emulate the portrait of unimpeachable black masculinity his mother’s story delineates—even as he “labor[s] under great emotion” and “his face

¹²¹*Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 90.

becomes distorted with passion and hatred” (Act I, 41).¹²² But, for Rachel whose own maternal desires generate a profound identification with her mother’s recollection of her

¹²²Mrs. Loving recalls her husband as “a man among men” and a “Saint.” Importantly, too, her speech inscribes him as a “race man,” as contemporary designations would have had it. “‘Big’” seems to fit him better than any other word. He was big-bodied—big-souled. His loves were big and his hates. You can imagine, then, how the wrongs of the Negro—ate his soul. He was utterly fearless” in his denunciations of “a mob made up of the respectable people in the town [who] lynched an innocent black man” which, in turn, led to his own lynching. Likewise, her son, George, seventeen at the time of his murder, “was—a man” and “tried to rescue” his stepfather from the lynchers. Despite knowing his fate after his stepfather shot four of their attackers before being “overpowered and dragged out,” George “never made an outcry” (Act I, 41). In her discussion of the lynching plays’ representation of black manhood, Koritha Mitchell argues that “the genre puts forth a theory that black manhood is characterized by honor and dignity, but the genre also exposes the consequences of embodying those ideals in a racist society geared toward obliterating black examples of the strength and integrity that are admired in white men.” *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 64.

It is symbolically important that George was not Mr. Loving’s biological son. This familial construction prefigures Rachel’s adoption of Jimmy, thereby enacting a dramatic typology that sustains the play’s symmetry. But, in addition to its formal work, the nonbiological relationship figuratively extends George’s “manly” courage back to the other missing black man, Mrs. Loving’s first husband, as it simultaneously validates his connection to his stepfather. Although Mrs. Loving reveals that she was a widow when she met her second husband, she does not disclose the circumstances surrounding her first husband’s death. He may have been lynched; perhaps he was not. But his absence—along with that of the two murdered men—and Tom’s intermittent removal from the play’s dramatic action (after his mother tells the story of his father’s and brother’s lynchings, Tom “rushes out”) symbolize lynching’s violent removal of black men from their families and communities. My emphasis on the figurative significance of black men’s absence functions as a corollary to other scholars contention that the centrality of women characters “reinforces recognition of the important role black women play in passing on vital knowledge,” “expressing what Gloria T. Hull has called the ‘unique horror’ black women faced in regards to lynching” and deploying an early feminist dramatic framework that simply legitimizes the foregrounding of women and their actions. *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, p. 11 and *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, p. 34.

Mr. Loving’s “saintly” stature and the confirmed innocence of the man whose lynching he editorialized against also establish the portraits of unblemished black manhood that Grimké and her successors deemed necessary for their anti-lynching ideological appeals and protests. Importantly, *Rachel* and other African American

traumatic experience, Mrs. Loving's disclosure reveals the black maternal subject as a terrified and violated survivor: "It was very still when I finally uncovered my ears. The only sounds were the faint rustle of leaves and the 'tap-tapping of the twig of a tree' against a window. I hear it still—sometimes in my dreams. It was the tree—where they were" (Act I, 41).

Crucially, *Rachel* claims that such oral representations of maternal trauma can enact what Koritha Mitchell calls the "generational consequences of the nation's hypocrisy" and that "the household continues to be 'lynched' long after the body has disappeared."¹²³ Grimké's play emphasizes that while both language and time function as mediators between the mother's representation and the daughter's receptive identification, Mrs. Loving's speech creates a palpably "new" trauma for Rachel because lynching continues to be—in the play's textual and cultural present—a weapon of racial and sexual terror. Mrs. Loving's narrative, then, is not only that of the survivor's representation of her and her family's traumatic past. It is also an articulation of her community's ongoing traumatic present, as this critical speech illustrates:

women's anti-lynching texts repudiate the statistically negligible but emotionally charged white supremacist excuse that lynching was an understandable response to black men's chronic raping of white women. Presenting their works as symbolic rejections of the myth of the black rapist and as figurative corroborations of contemporary investigative statistics which refuted that myth, these writers instead construct a discourse of courageous masculinity in which the lynched victims are represented as defenders of their economic rights (Mary Powell Burrill's *Aftermath* and *Safe*) and as protectors of black civic and political equity (*Rachel* and "The Closing Door"). In the plays in which sexual assault is foregrounded—*Blue-Eyed Black Boy*, *A Sunday Morning in the South* and May Miller's *Nails and Thorns*—credible black characters counter, respectively, that the accused is a "gentleman;" his innocence is firmly established; or the reliability of the accuser is questioned while dramatically-endorsed characters argue that—beyond the destruction of one man—lynching undermines the American legal system.

¹²³ *Living with Lynching* . . . p. 56, 64.

Then, everywhere, everywhere, throughout the South, there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts—pain. Oh, I know this is true—for this is the way I should feel if I were little Jimmy’s mother. How horrible! Why—it would be more merciful—to strangle the little things at birth. And so this nation—this white Christian nation—has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful—the most holy thing in life—motherhood! Why—it—makes—you doubt—God! (Act 1, 42).

Rachel’s indictment of American Christian hypocrisy¹²⁴ and her simultaneous articulation of her own emerging spiritual crisis gain dramatic force when we remember that—once theatrically produced—a young black actress would make such pronouncements under a visually prominent reproduction of the venerated, white *Sistine Madonna*. Yet, even as written text, such a juxtaposition of an idealized image of motherhood—to which white women theoretically could aspire and from which black women were deliberately and malevolently excluded—with this figuration of aborted maternal desire corrupted into murderous resolution reinforce *Rachel*’s fundamental hope that its intended (white) audience would be moved to anti-racist empathy and activism once it recognized lynching’s impact on sensitive, genteel young women.

¹²⁴Relying on the early religious scholarship of Benjamin Mays, Orlando Patterson observes that “many of the Afro-American writers of the early part of this century, especially those of the Harlem Renaissance, either considered God impotent or irrelevant or simply abandoned the idea of God altogether.” As an example of this rejection, Patterson cites Countee Cullen’s poem, “Wishing He I Served Were Black,” in which “A man was lynched last night.” *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries*. (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), p. 227. Grimké’s work indicates that she might certainly be added to this cohort that included Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois as well.

Although the United States' ideological discourse of sentimental motherhood had been attenuated in the years between its mid-nineteenth-century apex and the early twentieth century—the period of Grimké's writing—biological maternity continued to be perceived as the primary imperative for most women. Thus even with the emergence of the “new (primarily white) woman” whose recent educational gains and independent civic Club participation had generated increasingly forceful demands for suffrage, reproductive self-determination, economic autonomy and professional recognition, motherhood retained an ideological and social prominence that Grimké recognizes and deploys to create both dramatic and political urgency.

In its second act, *Rachel* reinforces this urgency in its dramatization of an encounter between Rachel, now Jimmy's adopted mother, and another black woman, the mother of seven year-old Ethel. Mrs. Lane presses Rachel with questions about the treatment of black children in the school in Rachel's neighborhood as part of her search for a new home for her family after Ethel had been viciously taunted and marginalized in her old school. According to her mother, Ethel has been victimized because “God there made her ugly—and black,” not “brown,” a color distinction, she insists, that makes her daughter more vulnerable to both intraracial marginalization and interracial violence (Act II, 55-57).¹²⁵ Ethel's persecution—which mirrors Jimmy's—reminds audiences that

¹²⁵ *Rachel*'s representation of Ethel Lane portrays her as an uncanny precursor to *The Bluest Eye*'s Pecola Breedlove. Like Pecola, Ethel is a “nervous wreck” after she's been racially traumatized. But, more significantly, in terms of her imagistic resemblance to Pecola and her family, I quote Mrs. Lane's description of her family: “my husband and I are poor, and we're ugly and we're black. Ethel looks like her father more than she does like me. We live in 55th Street—near the railroad. It's a poor neighborhood, but the rent's cheap. My husband is a porter in a store and, to help out, I'm a caretaker” (Act II,

black girls as well as black boys are targets of racial and gender persecution. As their painful conversation concludes, Rachel asks, “have you any other children?” Mrs. Lane’s response “dryly” reinforces the play’s insistence that racial violence corrupts maternal love and desire into infanticidal despair: “‘Hardly! If I had another—I’d kill it. It’s kinder.’” She then advises Rachel, “‘don’t marry,’” revealing the contemporary cultural linkage between marriage and motherhood (Act II, 58).

Though “stricken” by Mrs. Lane’s admonition, Rachel continues to vacillate between her marital and maternal desires and her increasing conviction that racism’s “blight—sooner or later—strikes all” black Americans (Act II, 60). When her adopted seven year-old son returns from school, however, and relates that he has become a direct victim of racial violence—chased, struck by a stone, and called a “nigger”—she vows

56). Morrison has transformed the store from a place of employment to substandard housing in her novel but she has changed little about the metaphysical connection both families make between their blackness and their “ugliness.” *The Bluest Eye*’s omniscient narrator explains: “The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly.... No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly” *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970), p. 38. *Rachel* offers no other supporting evidence for Ethel’s and her family’s ugliness except their blackness. Similarly, the Breedloves “conviction” about their ugliness derives from their internalization of a cultural standard of beauty that denigrates their dark skin color and Negroid features. Grimké’s play and Morrison’s novel differ significantly, however, in their constructions of the relationships between their respective mothers and daughters. Despite her certainty about her daughter’s “ugliness,” Mrs. Lane is fiercely and proactively devoted to her, “complain[ing] to the authorities” about her daughter’s treatment at school before she determines, ultimately, that she can protect Ethel best by moving her to another school and neighborhood. On the other hand, Pauline Breedlove routinely ignores or is complicit in her daughter’s multiple traumas, speaks to her in a “voice thin with anger” only and offers no resistance to their shared racial and gender oppression (p. 109).

Finally, I draw attention to the way in which Morrison’s ironic naming of the “Breedloves” echoes Grimké’s decidedly straightforward naming of her “Loving” family.

never to become a biological mother, rejects her lover's marriage proposal and begins a descent into madness. She is characterized by a "wide, tragic look" as though "her soul had been mortally wounded" and by her hypervigilance about her son's safety—"she will hardly let Jimmy out of her sight. While he's at school, she's nervous and excited. She seems always to be listening, but for what? When he returns, she nearly devours him,"" and through her auditory hallucinations about the children she once had hoped to bear—"I can hear them now....I can't stand the sound of their crying"" (Act III, 67)—Rachel's insanity emerges as the narrative strategy the play employs in order to create a culturally forgivable, if not morally sanctioned, defense of what I interpret as the young woman's off-stage killing of her adopted son. (Grimké returns to a very similar deployment of insanity in "The Closing Door").

While other critics agree with Claudia Tate's conclusion that the play "closes with Rachel quieting her crying unborn children with the assurance that she will allow them to remain happy beyond the reach of a racist society" (DA, p. 221), they give little or no attention to Rachel's final and off-stage scene with Jimmy. When they do, they do not question Grimké's extra-dramatic assertion that "the play ends in blackness and with the inconsolable sounds of little Jimmy weeping."¹²⁶ In short, they do not recognize any hermeneutic space between stated authorial intent and textual construction. I argue here, however, that Grimké structures her ending in a way that allows the recognition of the possibility of an off-stage infanticide. When Jimmy awakes from another of what has become recurring nightmares in the aftermath of his racial assault, Rachel goes to

¹²⁶“*Rachel*, 'The Play of the Month: *The Reason and Synopsis by the Author*, p. 416.

comfort him “with her whole soul in her voice,” as she cries, ““Ma Rachel loves you so”” (Act III, 78). What some readers overlook—despite the final characterization of Rachel’s movements as “blind” “unsteady,” and “stumbling”—is the way in which she seems to make no distinctions between Jimmy’s cries and her unborn children’s weeping. She cannot make this distinction, of course, since the “weeping” is an aural hallucination that is symptomatic of her insanity. This inability to distinguish is significant because Rachel vows to keep her unconceived children “safe” from racial persecution by not giving them life and in her confusion, I conclude, takes Jimmy’s life in order to protect him from further racial violence. As Rachel “disappears” into Jimmy’s bedroom, “the light in the lamp flickers and goes out...It is black. The terrible, heartbreaking weeping continues” (Act III, 78). The weeping could be the sounds of Rachel’s despair and sorrow about killing her son.

Two earlier scenes substantiate my conclusion that the play’s ending invites its audience to speculate about an infanticide. In another moment of spiritual crisis, as Rachel berates a “terrible, laughing God” for his ongoing abandonment of African Americans, she positions herself as his more compassionate opposite: ““I can be kinder than you. (*Fiercely she snatches the rosebuds from the vase, grasps them roughly, tears each head from the stem, and grinds it under her feet...*). If I kill, You Mighty God, I kill at once—I do not torture”” (Act II, 61). The play already had associated Jimmy with the flowers when he had inquired, “[r]osebuds are just like little ‘chilyun,’ aren’t they, Ma Rachel? If you are good to them, they’ll grow up into lovely roses, won’t they? And if

you hurt them, they'll die'" (Act II, 59). Thus Rachel's crushing of the rosebuds foreshadows her killing of Jimmy.

In the second instance, Rachel's halting explanation for her destruction of the roses to her suitor incites his fears about the possible consequences of her deteriorating mental stability and its accompanying violence, as represented by the ferocity with which she had destroyed his gift to her:

Strong: So I gathered. (pauses and then leans forward; quietly) Rachel, little girl, why—did you kill them?

Rachel: (breathing quickly) Don't you believe—it—a—a—kindness—sometimes—to kill?

Strong: (after a pause) You—considered—it—a—kindness—to kill them?

Rachel: Yes. (another pause)

Strong: Do you mean—just—the roses?

Rachel: (breathing more quickly) John!—Oh! must I say? (Act III, 74).

Rachel cannot articulate the “unspeakable” thought that she plans to murder her adopted son. Grimké's refusal to depict the infanticide indicates her reluctance to present a staged spectacle of a black woman murdering a child at a historical moment in which white supremacist discourse routinely represented black people as savage degenerates.¹²⁷ One remembers, too, Grimké's propagandist intention to

¹²⁷*Rachel's* first production in 1916 came a year after D.W. Griffith's negrophobic film *Birth of A Nation*, itself based on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*. Griffith's movie was, perhaps, the most notorious warnings against “the Negro Peril,” given that

dramatize a maternal appeal to white, middle-class women, some of whom, certainly, would have been adherents of the pervasive ideology of beneficent motherhood. Even those who would have questioned the ideology's relevance to their own and their peers' lives might have been reluctant to extend the (sometimes) social and ideological benefits of such a construction of motherhood to black women if a symbolic representative of this latter group was theatrically presented as a murderer of her own child—adopted or biological.

By constructing her play for a primarily white female audience, Grimké created both dramatic and ideological limitations for her theatrical appeal since she risked alienating the audience she most wanted to attract if she visibly and explicitly represented infanticide as a tragic consequence of black maternal trauma as well as a desperate act of black maternal resistance. Although Grimké did not speak directly about her secondary audience, African Americans, she did not seem to anticipate the charges of “race suicide” that would be leveled by that audience. Here, too, Grimké seems to have miscalculated because some African Americans interpreted Rachel's refusal to marry and have biological children as a symbolic act of internecine genocide, not as an empowering act of resistance against white supremacy and lynching. I have not come across any evidence that Grimké's contemporary audiences and readers recognized the possibility of an

such exhortations were ubiquitous in so-called “Sambo Art,” Eugenics manifestos and political speeches. One of *Birth of a Nation*'s primary “black” characters (a white actor in blackface) was given the name Silas Lynch, encoding the movie's conviction of the predetermined and desired fate of black masculinity.

infanticide at the end of *Rachel*, as I hope my argument will encourage current readers to do.

In my interpretation, Rachel's unseen murder of her son in the play's final scene symbolizes the infanticide that Grimké seemed unable or unwilling to make theatrically visible but that points to the explicit infanticide that Agnes commits in "The Closing Door," a text not intended for theatrical production. Grimké expands her inscription of the connection among lynching, maternal "heartbreak" and infanticide in her short story three years later. Her friend Georgia Douglas Johnson, too, will extend her own dramatic attention to this connection in *Safe*. Intriguingly enough, sixteen years after *Rachel*, Johnson will also refuse an onstage dramatization of black maternal infanticide.

In "The Closing Door" and *Safe*, both Grimké and Johnson, respectively, emphasize vulnerable and embattled black maternity in the era of lynching through their deployments of young women whose initial pregnancies and initiating lynching traumas coincide to expose their and their community's precarious existence. Although contemporary dominant ideological beliefs and institutions did not extend to African American mothers the relative, if sometimes constraining, privileges of middle-class and working-class motherhood—including iconographic exaltation and, more materially, beneficial gestures of regard such as inclusion in maternal health programs and protection under contemporary labor laws¹²⁸—these two black women writers sought to reinforce

¹²⁸Including the passage of the 1921 Shepard-Towner Act for the "Promotion of the Welfare and Hygiene and Maternity and Infancy;" In her discussion about white, middle-class women's role in the "creation of the American Welfare State," during the Progressive Era Kathryn Sklar contends that the General Federation of Women's Clubs

their maternal appeals—and to challenge such exclusions—by beginning their texts with pregnancy and, consequently, its association with delicacy, vulnerability and anticipatory joy. If a young, pregnant woman could not protect herself and could not be protected by her family and larger community from racism’s violent intrusions, no black mother, no black woman, and, indeed, no black person was immune to its relentless reach.

In both *Safe* and “The Closing Door,” a first-time mother kills her newborn son when what I would call her initiation into lynching’s ritualistic violence traumatically engenders the conviction that her despairing but self-determined murder of her baby is preferable to the racial brutalities to which black males routinely are subjected, and from which she would be unable to protect him in the future. “The Closing Door’s” maternal protagonist, Agnes Milton has lived in an unnamed northern, urban locale for many years when she receives a telegram from her family in Mississippi announcing the death of her younger brother, Bob. While the abrupt letter does not provide any details about the circumstances of the death, its terse imperative, “under no circumstances come,” signals to everyone in Agnes’ household—and to the reader—the likelihood that Bob has been murdered “at the hands of persons unknown,” the notorious phrase of journalistic and

grounded their advocacy for the funding and distribution of “mothers pensions” on their “moral outrage” against the “employment of mothers of young children” (p. 55). In a related article in the same volume, Sonya Michel makes the point that, knowing the material realities of black women’s lives and that most would not be given state mothers’ pensions, “African American philanthropists” established urban day cares because they “accepted maternal employment as a fact of life” (p. 290). See Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Historical Foundations of Women’s Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930” (pp. 43-93); and Sonya Michel, “The Limits of Maternalism: Policies toward American Wage-Earning Mothers during the Progressive Era” (pp. 277-320) in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, Ed. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York: Routledge, 1993).

judicial negation of white culpability *and* rhetorical signature of institutional complicity in the lynching of black people. Family members attempt to shield Agnes from the truthful circumstances of her brother's death but suspecting as much, she eavesdrops as an older brother who has traveled from Mississippi recounts the details to her husband and cousin. Once she hears the particulars of Bob's brutal murder, Alice begins to hope that her own baby will die upon birth if it is male. When that baby boy is born and continues to grow, strong and healthy, Agnes smothers him.

Safe's drama surrounds Liza Pettigrew who lives with her husband, John, and her mother, Mindy Grimes. The small family is preparing for the birth of Liza's and John's first child but the lynching of Sam Hosea, a neighbor, destroys their joyous anticipation. Liza's initiation into the brutal American ritual Walter White derisively characterized as an "integral part of our national folkways"¹²⁹ so close to her expected parturition traumatizes her. Hysterical, she announces that she does not "want to ever have no boy chile" because she does not "want no boy baby to be hounded down and kicked around."¹³⁰ Liza goes into labor immediately after the lynching and when she realizes that she has given birth to a healthy son, she strangles him.

Recognizing the plot similarities between "The Closing Door" and *Safe*—as well as that between *Rachel* and Johnson's poem "Black Woman"—Gloria Hull concludes in a footnote that "clearly, black women—as mothers and potential mothers—felt a unique

¹²⁹*Rope and Faggot*, Preface (viii).

¹³⁰*Safe*, published in *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From the New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Judith L. Stephens (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 155. All subsequent citations will be from this publication.

horror about lynching.”¹³¹ Although Hull’s critical priorities do not lie in exploring the horrific particularities of this specific racial-gender-familial position, she correctly perceives both writers’ deployment of the maternal figure and her relationship to lynching as “unique”—distinct from, say, the paternal or any other familial position.

In order to highlight the primary position of the mother in both texts, for instance, fathers are relegated increasingly to the margins as the dramas unfold. In *Safe*, the stage directions call for the physical removal of John Pettigrew from his home, a departure that precedes the crucial moment when his pregnant wife witnesses the lynching. After both Agnes and Jim, her husband, learn of her brother’s lynching in “The Closing Door,” we hear very little from or about him, apart from the narrator’s assurance that he “never complained, never was irritable, but was always so gentle, so full of understanding” when Alice begins her descent into insanity.¹³² Underscoring—but bearing no culpability for it—their powerlessness to save their sons or protect their wives from white violence, neither husband intervenes to prevent the infanticide and both are rendered as helpless figures in strikingly similar descriptions.¹³³ When John learns from the attending doctor that his wife has strangled their son, he “falls down on a chair sobbing, his face in his

¹³¹P. 229.

¹³²“The Closing Door,” in *Selected Works of Angelina Grimké*. All subsequent citations will be from this publication.

¹³³There is little indication that these texts are interested in challenging prevailing, conventional assumptions about the patriarchal responsibility of filial and spousal protection in this context. They emphasize that white supremacists violently have wrenched this prerogative from the black father and husband. That said, the repetition of the husband/father’s peripheral posture suggests a metaphoric skepticism about patriarchal marriage as a protective or nurturing space for black women and their children.

hands” (161). An almost mirror image of John, Jim Milton “sit[s] leaning far forward, his head between his hands” as his household crumbles around him (276).

The centrality of mothers, then, represents Johnson’s and Grimké’s insistence on exploring the “unique horror” that defines black maternity during lynching’s heyday. “The Closing Door” and *Safe* depict young women who grimly confront the recognition that they, first, conceive and nurture during pregnancy; second, give birth to; and finally, rear and love children who routinely become the hunted prey of white mobs. Like their enslaved ancestresses before them who recognized that their reproductive capacities contributed to the maintenance of slavery in the form of slaves and, therefore, slave labor, these post-Reconstruction and early twentieth-century black women realize their agonizing position as reproducers of the victims of the aptly named “lynching industry.”¹³⁴

The authors do not indict black mothers as complicit participants in this terrorist regime. They do emphasize, however, black women’s recognition of the violent degradation of their reproductive abilities—demonstrated in white people’s disregard, indeed contempt, for their (potential) maternal positions and roles. Having just learned, for example, that her favorite brother had been lynched for the “offense” of not yielding his place on a sidewalk to a white man, the young, pregnant Agnes “beat[s] her breast,” and with the “eyes of a seeress,” cries out: “I!—I!—An instrument!—A colored

¹³⁴Writing about the post-Civil War revival of lynching, Walter White noted that “the lynching industry was revolutionized by the Emancipation Proclamation, which wiped out the cash value of a Negro. The balance swung so sharply that it was not long after Lee had surrendered at Appomattox before Negroes formed the great majority of the lynched.” *Rope and Faggot*, pp. 93-94.

woman—doomed...to bring children here—men children—for the sport—the lust—of possible orderly mobs...” (274-75). Now aware of her “part” as “one of the many” black women who mother the “men children” of future lynchings (274), Agnes’ earlier anxieties about being “*too* happy” (260) regarding the expectant birth of her child are confirmed and she becomes a “grey pathetic shadow of herself” (276), a characterization that recalls Rachel’s “haggard and grey” appearance in Grimké’s play. When Agnes eventually gives birth to her son, she negates her maternal role by refusing to have anything to do with him, only twice breaking the “strange, stony stillness” that indicates her determined emotional and physical detachment from her baby (278). This estrangement foreshadows, of course, Agnes’ murder of her son as well as her own subsequent death in the asylum in which she is confined after the killing.

In her study, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, Teresa Goddu argues for a redefinition of the national particularities of the gothic genre that locates its literary development within specific cultural and social contexts and asserts that “slavery haunts the American gothic” and that the “American gothic is haunted by race.”¹³⁵ Although Goddu’s focus on African American writers’ engagement with the gothic centers primarily on Harriet Jacobs’ nineteenth-century slave narrative, her epilogue observes correctly that for many other African American writers “the gothic has served as a useful mode in which to resurrect and resist America’s racial history.”¹³⁶ In her resolve to represent “what motherhood means to the colored woman” in the climate of racial

¹³⁵(New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 3, 7.

¹³⁶Ibid., p. 153.

menace in which lynching—again, slavery’s progeny—figures prominently,¹³⁷ Grimké constructs a tale of maternal dread that situates “The Closing Door” as an early twentieth-century, African American gothic narrative upon which other writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison would build their own symbolic engagements with the constitutive violence of America’s racial history.

Deploying the gothic’s identifiable tropes of foreshadowing, mystery, dread, along with a discourse of contamination and contagion to structure her narrative of maternal trauma, Grimké recodes pregnancy so that, for instance, the joy which Agnes initially expresses becomes almost immediately an “inexplicable terror” that “infect[s]” not only Alice’s excitement but also that of her household which includes her husband and a younger cousin, Lucy, who also functions as the story’s narrator (262). Lucy recounts that Alice’s post-conception “wide, dark, and unseeing” eyes, together with her articulated fears of being “*too* happy,” would send an “unpleasant chill up and down my back” (260-61). Unnervingly, too, during the early months of her pregnancy, Alice begins to isolate herself from her husband and cousin, deliberately repeating the action from which the story takes its name:

We were to become accustomed to it, Jim and I, as much as it was possible to do so, in those terrible days that were to follow. We were to become used to entering a room in search of Agnes, only to find it empty and the door opposite closing closing, almost imperceptibly noiselessly—and, yes, at last irrevocably between us. And each time it happened the terror was as fresh upon me as at the very first (262).

¹³⁷“Rachel,” *The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis*, in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, p. 415.

The accepted but unexplained terror remains so fresh and pervasive that the members of the household begin to live lives of circumspection, uncharacteristically performing their daily tasks so “quietly” and “softly” that “even the neighbors noticed the difference” (262). Despite such attempts to contain their fears, “there came to be also a sort of expectancy upon us, a listening, a waiting” for the impending horror for which their lives as early twentieth-century African Americans have prepared them.

In order to emphasize that such terror has specific historical and social foundations—and, therefore, is not superstitious or irrational—Grimké organizes the story so that Lucy introduces Bob, Agnes’ beloved younger brother, to the reader in the paragraphs that immediately follow her recollection of the persistent dread that accompanies Agnes’ pregnancy. She then recalls the paralyzing tension that gripped the household when Agnes’ surviving brother, Joe, arrived unannounced from the South, following the news of Bob’s unexplained death. Even before Joe discloses “the truth” about the lynching, his very arrival and halting words make Lucy “stiffen in [her] chair” and “trembl[e] all over” (270-71). When the disclosure of Bob’s lynching confirms these premonitions, it also engenders the persistent image that Agnes carries throughout her pregnancy. This image is not that of the proverbial “bundle of joy” but rather that of her brother, shot, burnt, and dismembered, “still hanging on that tree” because his family had “not [been] allowed to have even what is left” (273).

By adapting the tropes of the gothic genre to her figurative inscription of the paralyzing terror of lynching for African Americans, Grimké contributes to the multi-

authorial endeavor of historicizing a popular narrative genre, of course, and establishes her artistic significance to African American and American literary developments. But, equally important, her redeployment of the gothic's familiar attributes enables her unwavering determination to examine the cultural trauma that lynching's pervasive violence engendered. With the image of her brutalized brother ever present, Alice "never smiled, never chuckled any more." She hopelessly concludes that "'there is a time coming—and soon—when no colored man—no colored woman—no colored child, born or unborn—will be safe—in this country'" (275) which was precisely the intended message of the lynchings' perpetrators.¹³⁸ Agnes' conviction about the precariousness of African American lives only intensifies after she gives birth to a "healthy" and "strong" baby boy with whom "she would have very little to do" (278, 279). This deliberate maternal estrangement and the "strange, stony stillness upon her" portends her preparation to murder her son—whom she smothers while he sleeps.

Although Grimké represents Agnes' infanticide as a deliberate and calculated act of maternal agency in the face of racial terrorism, her attention to contemporary standards of normative gender behavior informs her portrayal of her protagonist so that the young mother emerges as a sympathetically tragic figure that cannot easily be ridiculed or dismissed as a deranged, black monster. Immediately before she recounts the infanticide,

¹³⁸In less than a month after the lynching of Mary Turner in May 1918, the Colored Federated Clubs of Georgia penned an open petition to President Woodrow Wilson and Georgia's governor, Hugh Dorsey, to "use all the power" of their offices to effect "swift justice" because black people were "discouraged and crushed by a spirit of humiliation and dread," convinced that their "lives are unsafe as long as this iniquitous institution exists." "'Resolutions Expressive of Feelings Sent to President and Governor,'" *Savannah Tribune*, 8 June 1918. Reprinted in Julie Buckner Armstrong. *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2011), p. 211.

Lucy recalls two incidents during which Agnes' "stony stillness" dissolves to reveal a more recognizable maternal deportment. First, Lucy encounters the new mother when "the baby was fast asleep. And she had stolen into look at him, when she thought no one would know. I never wish to see such a tortured, hungry face again" (279). In a second scene, Lucy finds Agnes "kneeling at the foot of the crib, her head upon the spread. Great, terrible racking sobs were tearing her" (Ibid). Fearful that she would begin to express maternal affection and establish a connection with her son, Agnes begs Lucy to "take him away....' He's been cooing, and smiling and holding out his little arms to me. I can't stand it! I can't stand it'" (Ibid). Grimké seeks to protect her protagonist—and, by extension, black women—from anticipated, intersecting racist and sexist indictments that would challenge her femininity while promoting her supposed racial deficiencies by revealing Agnes' true maternal desire to love and nurture her son. Simultaneously, her representation of such maternal longing and deprivation reinforces the story's insistence that lynching's violence distorts and destroys African American lives, particularly black women's sense of themselves as nurturing, life-giving and life-sustaining subjects.

One imagines that Grimké could not help but consider readers' potential reception of Agnes and her act of infanticide given the ambivalent reactions to her play, *Rachel*, the worst of which was the allegation of the playwright's advocacy of "race suicide." No more than three years after *Rachel*'s initial production in 1916, however, Grimké elected to publish "The Closing Door" in the September and October 1919 issues of the *Birth Control Review*. Readers of the magazine were informed that, together with Mary Burrill's play, *They that Sit in Darkness*, Grimké's story expressly was "written for the

Birth Control Review.”¹³⁹ Burrill’s play and Grimké’s story were the two fictional texts that appeared in this “special number” of Margaret Sanger’s political organ, which carried the subtitle “The New Emancipation: The Negroes’ Need for Birth Control, As Seen by Themselves” (title page). Along with the explicitly fictional texts, this special issue also includes a white woman’s editorial comment that stresses, with not an insignificant tone of noblesse oblige, that the “obligation to aid [black mothers] make their lives decent and livable lies...directly with the white women” of the United States. The issue also presents an “interview,” minus the original questions, with Chandler Owen, editor of *The Messenger*, the black magazine; a letter from Isaac Fisher, an editor at Fisk University, that defends black women against charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity; and, finally, a few reviews of books written by and about black people, including Georgia Douglas Johnson’s volume, *The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems*. In short, this was the special “Negro” issue of the *Birth Control Review*.

Among all of these race—and gender—informed texts, “The Closing Door” stands out conspicuously because its inclusion as a story of black maternal infanticide in this periodical, which was expressly “dedicated to Voluntary Motherhood” and whose usual audience was primarily white, inclines one to agree with Gloria Hull that “it seems somehow wrong that this tale of madness and infanticide would appear in such a journal and even more peculiar that the killing societal reasons for Agnes’s misfortune would be used as an argument for birth control among black people.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, apart from its venue of publication, there is nothing in the story to indicate an advocacy of conscious

¹³⁹*Birth Control Review* 3, 9 (September 1919), p. 10.

¹⁴⁰*Color, Sex, and Poetry*, p. 129.

and voluntary family planning. Quite early on, Lucy, the narrator relates that “there was just the merest suspicion of a cloud over [Jim’s and Agnes’s] happiness..., they had been married five years and had no children” (255-56). She continues on to explain that “the mother heart of Agnes” had displaced part of its desire for children into her own informal adoption, as a younger, distant cousin (256). Both Agnes and Jim are joyful when she finally becomes pregnant and they are clearly capable, financially and otherwise, of caring for the child. Indeed the couple, and especially Agnes, fits perfectly into the group Grimké called, with regrettable elitism, “the best type of colored people.”¹⁴¹ Given this framework of the story, it challenges one to comprehend how it could underscore the necessity of black people’s access to birth control and advance the cause of “voluntary motherhood.”

As discomfiting as the original publication of “The Closing Door” in the *Birth Control Review* might be, I want to suggest the likelihood that Grimké contributed her story to this periodical because she took the opportunity to protest against lynching and to emphasize the correlation she drew between its horror and a violated black maternal subjectivity whenever that opportunity arose. In her short story, then, she extends her project of appealing to whites through a discourse of violated maternity that she had begun in *Rachel*. Perhaps Grimké did not fully realize that the publication of “The Closing Door” in this organ of the United States’ birth control movement—which was tainted by the contemporary influence of eugenics’ racialism—inadvertently offered an opening for the *Birth Control Review*’s primarily white audience to imagine black birth

¹⁴¹“Rachel,” *The Play of the Month: The Reason and Synopsis*, p. 415.

control and black infanticide—in other words, decreased black birthrates and black self-destruction—rather than political enfranchisement, economic opportunities, and social equality as the solutions to America’s social morass. It seems that Grimké placed such confidence in white women’s presumed identification with black women’s maternity that she failed to imagine that her assumed audience might feel *less* horror at the thought of black mothers killing their babies in order to protect them than at the murderous racial conditions which might force a mother to conclude that infanticide offered a viable choice of maternal protection.

While there is no way definitively to gauge the response of the *Birth Control Review*’s wider audience to Grimké’s story, we do know that “The Closing Door” sufficiently appealed to the editors of the magazine that they invited her to submit a second story. Grimké responded with “Goldie,” another short narrative that links lynching to violated black maternity and, as I have noted above, was based on the lynching and murder of pregnant Mary Turner and her unborn child. For Grimké, those killings exemplified “the brutality and the ruthlessness of the lynchings in this country” and prompted her to implore with increasing despair: “Where are these lynchings leading the U.S.A. In what will they end?”¹⁴² The “Closing Door”’s narrative of infanticide and Agnes’ debilitating—and, ultimately, fatal—madness offers one figurative, terrible answer.

¹⁴²“Letter to the *Atlantic Monthly*: Reference to the Plot of “Blackness” and “Goldie”” *Selected Works*, pp. 417-18.

Agnes' madness and death within the "dark, foul-smelling cages" of the asylum in which she is confined after she smothers her son functions, first, as the requisite punishment for moral transgression that readers have come to recognize as an established literary convention, especially when the transgressor is a female character (256). Second, and more forcefully, madness and death sound the final note in Grimké's condemnation of the pervasive and vicious racial conditions—embodied in the lynching of Agnes' brother—which destroy the young black woman's anticipation of a viable future for her son with whom she would sustain a nurturing, maternal relationship. Agnes' death—indeed, her transformation into a "blank, empty...grey automaton, a mere shell" before she dies—within a state institution symbolizes America's annihilation of black women's maternal subjectivity. The setting of Agnes' death in a northern asylum after her brother's murder on southern land firmly represents racial violence as a national, systemic crime.

Grimké's inscription of infanticide as an act of black maternal resistance reads, however, like a muted, individual tragedy rather than a call for collective, political action against institutionalized violence. Both Agnes and her child die and nothing in the narrative suggests that either Lucy or Jim will see beyond the personal nature of their loss—a lack of vision that precludes a wider, communally-driven political engagement. In "The Closing Door," ultimately, the family's trauma of infanticide and maternal violation resonates more like a tragic, individualized lamentation and less like an insistent demand for collective political agitation and transformation.

While Georgia Douglas Johnson's play, *Safe*, also focuses primarily on the Pettigrew-Grimes' familial grief over Liza Pettigrew's strangulation of her newborn son,

the play's inclusion of characters outside the family—an involved neighbor and the doctor who witnesses the infanticide—signals its larger communal emphasis. Intratextually, this collective focus is highlighted by the characterization of Sam Hosea, the young man whose lynching incites Liza's trauma and triggers the infanticide, as a well-known member of the local black community though not a Pettigrew-Grimes family relation. The play's political determination becomes even more resonant once one recognizes its extratextual engagement with the history of lynching in its naming of the lynched man—even as the anonymity of the play's black community symbolizes the latter's representativeness: any black community was subject to lynching's terror. When Johnson named her murdered character Sam Hosea, she invoked the memory of the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose, a ritualized killing so notoriously vicious and well-publicized that it convinced a traumatized W.E.B. DuBois that whites relied on lynching as a tool of racial intimidation against all African Americans rather than as a mode of “punishment” of an individual black person. According to Philip Dray, “...the manner and spectacle of Hose's death—the eleven days of hysterical, incendiary newspaper articles, the almost complete lack of responsible intervention from high officials, the crowds running pell-mell from houses of God so as not to miss seeing a human being turned into a heap of ashes, and, ultimately, a set of knuckles on display in a grocery store showed [DuBois] that lynching was not some twisted aberration in Southern life, but a symptom of a much larger malady. Lynching was simply the most sensational manifestation of an animosity for black people that resided at a deeper level among whites than he had previously thought, and was ingrained in all of white society, its objective nothing less than the

continued subordination of blacks at any cost.”¹⁴³ Johnson’s invocation of Sam Hose in *Safe* indicates that she wished to ensure Hose’s specificity within the collective cultural memory of lynching’s trauma while she also, like DuBois, wanted to engage the meaning and consequences of this ingrained “animosity for black people.”

As part of her dramatic project to do so, Johnson shifts from the individualized specificity of Sam Hose(a) and situates the play in an unnamed “Southern town,” identifying the geographical region in which most lynchings were committed but still refusing an exemption to any state or town. The drama that unfolds implicates every place within the Southern landscape as a site of African American trauma. Johnson further underscores the collective focus of her figurative exploration of lynching by setting the play in 1893, six years before Sam Hose’s lynching but one of the years during which lynching reached its peak after its steady growth following the Reconstruction. According to both Ida B. Wells and Walter White, 200 lynchings were recorded in 1893. Of this number, 183 were committed in the South, a number which serves as a significant indicator of the larger number of African American people—individuals, families, and communities—who were affected by lynching’s terrorism. Johnson’s regional and temporal precision, then, has the effect of stressing the social conditions within which infanticide as an act of both racial resistance and maternal protection could be imagined.

¹⁴³ *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America.*, p. 15. The hunt for Sam Hose was publicized not only in local newspapers like the *Atlanta Constitution* and Newnan *Herald and Advertiser* but also in the nationally distributed *The New York Times*.

Developed sometime around 1929, *Safe*, was neither published or produced while Johnson, who died in 1966, was alive.¹⁴⁴ Correctly anticipating the fate of most of her prodigious output, Johnson wrote in 1944 that she would go to that “last peaceful abode” before much more of her writing would appear in print.¹⁴⁵ Despite its limited circulation, however, *Safe*’s thematics and structure significantly engaged broader cultural and theatrical concerns within this secondary social context of the 1920s. First, an increase in the number and the viciousness of the lynchings following the end of the First World War and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan with its accompanying white supremacist ideology fomented renewed anti-lynching discourse and activity. These included the formation of the National Council of Women and Mary B. Talbert’s Anti-Lynching Crusade in 1922. In 1930 Mary McLeod Bethune publicly exhorted southern white women to assume a more prominent role in the fight against lynching. That same year, white women organized the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. Bethune’s and Talbert’s exhortations (together with other black women’s) and

¹⁴⁴Following a number of widely publicized killings of unarmed black men by police between the summer of 2014 and the winter of 2015, a Brooklyn, New York community center, JACK, planned “reading” productions of anti-lynching plays from the early twentieth century, including *Safe*, in Spring, 2015.

¹⁴⁵Quoted in *Color, Sex, and Poetry*, p. 189. ‘Although *Plumes* and *Blue Blood*, two of the plays Johnson herself identified as “Primitive life Plays,” received significant contemporary recognition after being chosen for publication in such venues as *Opportunity* and Alain Locke’s *Plays of Negro Life* (1927). Produced by the Krigwa Players and the Harlem Experimental Theatre, among others, none of Johnson’s lynching plays was published until one version of *A Sunday Morning in the South* was included in James V. Hatch’s and Ted Shine’s 1974 anthology, *Black Theatre U.S.A.*. Indeed, when Johnson submitted her lynching plays to the NAACP’s Youth Council in an attempt to have them produced, none other than Walter White, the long-time anti-lynching activist, declined on behalf of the Council with the explanation that Johnson’s endings “gave one the feeling that the situation was hopeless despite all the courage which was shown by the Negro characters.”” Cited in *The Plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson: From The New Negro Renaissance to the Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 33-36.

the white women's organizational response authorized a significant shift in the discursive framing of lynching. Black and white women's public collaboration—strained though it often was—rejected white men's patriarchal assertions that lynching was the inevitable result of their prerogative to protect white women from black men's sexual violence. As a collective, white women began to utilize the discursive space that could acknowledge consensual sexual relationships between them and black men—a space that Ida B. Wells had created years before—and lay bare the racially and economically supremacist motivations behind mob violence.¹⁴⁶ In the legal arena, activists prodded sympathetic national legislators to introduce the anti-lynching bills whose rejection signaled on the highest level a sanctioned societal contempt for African Americans. Still, those same activists continued their anti-lynching efforts within multiple civic organizations. In short, the 1920s and 1930s produced an extensive discursive and institutional anti-lynching movement in which Johnson participated, including her development of *Safe* as well as her other lynching plays.

During this same period, the growing American theatrical emphasis on social realism—along with the New Negro Theatre Movement's encouragement of both folk drama and propaganda plays—created an artistic environment that engendered *Safe*'s dramatization of lynching's brutal consequences for an impoverished, rural family and its community. *Safe*'s structural brevity as a one-act play, too, adheres to the dramatic form

¹⁴⁶For more on the emergence of white women's participation in anti-lynching activism, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1979. Also, Crystal N. Feimster. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2009.

that contemporary magazines like *Opportunity* and *Crisis* encouraged through their annual literary competitions. Indeed, *Opportunity* awarded winning prizes to Johnson's plays *Blue Blood* and *Plumes* in 1926 and 1927, respectively.

Brief but dramatically effective, *Safe* opens with a scene of poor but gentle domesticity in Liza's and John's "three room cottage" which they share with Liza's mother Mindy who sleeps on a "cot along the wall" (110). As Liza sews "on some small white garments" for her expectant child, John, who had been reading the newspapers, announces that "they done caught Sam Hosea and put him in jail" (111). From this moment of abrupt disruption of familial content, the play unfolds to Sam's predictable lynching and, finally, Liza's strangulation of her newborn child when her urgent question "is it a girl?" is answered by the doctor with "no child, it's a fine boy" (115).

At least two interesting things about this play engage a critic's attention. First, Johnson raises and immediately rejects any supposition that Sam is lynched for the "usual crime" of raping a white woman. Liza asks anxiously, "'twant no woman mixed up in it, was it?" Her husband responds, "no, seems like he and his boss had some sort of dispute about wages—the boss slapped him and Sam hit him back" (111). Johnson insists on dramatizing that, notwithstanding the oft-repeated charge that black men were lynched because they assaulted and raped white women as a matter of course, lynching, in the postbellum era, increasingly became the weapon of choice that whites unleashed to retard and suppress black economic and political advancement. Even Ida B. Wells admitted that, at one time, she had "accepted the idea meant to be conveyed—that although lynching was irregular and contrary to law and order, unreasoning anger over the terrible

crime of rape led to the lynching.”¹⁴⁷ A series of investigations later, however, she had become “convinced that the Southerner had never gotten over his resentment that the Negro was no longer his plaything, his servant, and his source of income.”¹⁴⁸ Sam Hosea’s white employer’s assault symbolizes this contempt for the black population’s manumitted status—its transformation from slaves to citizens—as much as Sam’s defiant response represents black people’s determined, if dangerous, resistance to such contemptuous treatment. As an anti-lynching play, *Safe* insists on contesting the pervasive myth of transgressive black male sexuality and dramatizing the less publicized motivation of economic and political disfranchisement.

The second significant observation to be made about this play is the rapidity and extent to which Sam’s lynching becomes couched within a maternal discourse. This maternal figuration grows so prominent that Sam’s mother functions as much as a central figure as her son although neither appears on the stage. As soon as John informs his family of Sam’s capture and imprisonment, he expresses his concern for the young man’s mother, anticipating that she’s “plum crazy if she’s heard they got him.” Liza amplifies this expression of concern, providing more information about Sam’s mother than she does about Sam: “I know her. She’s a skinny brown-skinned woman. Belong to our church. She use to bring Sam along pretty regular all the time. He was a nice motherly sort of boy, not mor’n seventeen I’d say”(111). She further emphasizes Sam’s

¹⁴⁷*Crusade for Justice*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 70. Rhetorically adroit as we recognize her to have been, Wells simultaneously rejects the sexual rationalization for black men’s lynching even as she deploys “plaything” in order to remind her readers that “the Southerner” routinely used black women as sexual possessions.

attachment to his mother, deploring that, both literally and figuratively, he had received a “slap in the face” for “working hard to take kere of his widder mother” (112).

While horrified by Sam’s anticipated torture and murder, the pregnant Liza, envisioning her own forthcoming maternal status, forcefully identifies with Sam’s mother. This identification sets in motion the psychically transformative crisis that ensures Liza’s experience of Sam’s lynching as a traumatizing event—a deeply wounding violation—that, in turn, engenders her own act of maternal violence. For Liza, the young man’s brutal death signifies the fatal destruction of his mother’s relationship to him, and, therefore, the destruction of her maternal identity. The viability of a woman’s maternal identity, the play intimates, depends on her uncontested prerogative to protect her offspring. Lynching’s pervasive undermining of black maternal protection, then, engenders helplessness and desperation.

Johnson forcefully positions the black mother as failed protector at the moment of Sam’s lynching. Although the lynching takes place off-stage, the audience/readers recognize his desperate desire for maternal protection in his crying “voice [that] rises above the din outside,” unsuccessfully pleading “‘don’t hang me, don’t hang me...mother, mother!’” (113). His mother’s physical absence from the play emphasizes her inability to save him from mob violence. Not only do we not see Sam’s mother, we also do not hear her. Rather, what the play’s anticipated audience does hear and see is a “crumpling” and “shivering” Liza, her “teeth chattering,” visual and auditory characterizations that emphasize her position as Sam’s mother’s symbolic proxy. While Liza’s own agonizing cries—“Oh, my God, did you hear that poor boy crying for his

mother—he’s just a boy... just a little boy’”—give voice to the maternal fear and despair that Sam’s own mother might have expressed, her inability to rescue and comfort Sam, despite her presence, further underscores black maternal powerlessness. Liza’s own mother, Mindy, urges her to accept that if she attempts to help Sam, the lynchers would have no compunction about attacking a pregnant black woman: “‘They’ll shoot you—you can’t do that—they’re mad—mad!’”(113).

As the third maternal figure in the play, Mindy serves not only the dramatic function of circumscribed parental protection—that is, convincing Liza that she would only endanger herself with any rash attempt at rescue. Her words of maternal caution—together with the sounds that surround Sam’s lynching—precipitate Liza’s strangulation of her son. Both Mindy’s words and the rest of the play’s construction of the murder dramatize Liza’s traumatic experience as an auditory rather than a visual one. I stress this distinction because, first, *Safe* is a play, a literary form that deploys and relies upon visual economies. Second, both historical and critical examinations of lynching focus extensively on the *spectacle* of lynching, the parts of the ritual that crowds gathered—often in great numbers—to *see*; the centrality of the black body that must be (mis)identified and prominently displayed at the *scene* of its destruction. In short, the multiple discourses around lynching employ economies of the visual that critique but also replicate lynching’s ritual as familiar—if horrific—dramatic scenes. Noteworthy, then, is Johnson’s determination to extricate crucial moments in her anti-lynching play from visual economies and situate them within auditory discourses instead. Although Mindy says at one point that Liza “ain’t never seen no lynching not before,” a steady

accumulation of sounds primarily creates the horror: “a shot is heard” before “another shot rings out.” Stage directions that dictate a “confusion of many footsteps and tramping horses as the roar becomes louder” precede Mindy’s ineffectual pleading that Liza “hadn’t ought to hear all this screeching hell” even as “the roar outside continues” (113). Liza’s parturition comes immediately after this cacophonous rupture of their domestic calm but it is her mother’s words that she should “remember your own little baby—you got him to think about—you got to born him safe” that engender the idea that “safety” for a little black boy means death (114). As soon as Mindy pronounces her concern that her grandchild be born “safe,” Liza, wild eyed, “ asks her to repeat it. Then Liza, “hysterically” chanting the refrain, “born him safe,” goes into the room in which she gives birth, kills her son, and never appears again in the play.

The infanticide, like the lynching, takes place offstage. Trudier Harris has noted that African American women writers, unlike their male counterparts, rarely provide graphic representations of lynchings.¹⁴⁹ Certainly Johnson’s *Safe* does not, and “The Closing Door”’s most detailed description of the lynching of Agnes’s brother comes from another brother, Joe, who gives a secondary account when he quotes a newspaper’s report verbatim—with sarcastic bitterness. Moreover, “The Closing Door”’s narrator depicts the lynching in a retrospective narrative which further reduces the temporal immediacy of

¹⁴⁹*Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. xii-xiii.

the murder.¹⁵⁰ *It's Mornin'*'s infanticide, which I discuss in the next chapter, also takes place offstage.

While Harris concludes that black women writers' reticence about graphically depicting lynching's violence can be explained by their historically peripheral position "in the quadruple equation involving white males and females, and black males and themselves,"¹⁵¹ I want to suggest that the refusal of black women writers, especially the playwrights, to represent graphically the physical violence—lynching and/or infanticide—symbolizes their reluctance to replicate, even figuratively, the mutilations of black people which their respective texts were conceptualized to contest. The authors reject even the simulation of the historical torture, dismemberment, and murder of black adults and children, perhaps anxious that such symbolic violence could titillate and agonize white and black audiences, respectively. While our own twenty-first century postmodernity might encourage perspectives that lead us to question the assumptions about the extent of such unmediated audience identification and reception, we must acknowledge the contemporary understanding of the possible, immediate effects of cultural expressivity, exemplified by the extensive controversy surrounding the dissemination of D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* or, for that matter, Grimké's *Rachel*.

Although Johnson does not dramatize the performance of the violence inherent in both lynching and infanticide by removing both acts from the stage, the doctor's brief

¹⁵⁰Such mediations almost serve to shift the focus from the original violence to the post-traumatic consequences for those who continue to live with lynching.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

account of the baby's birth and death echoes the lynching so closely that they become intertwined symbolically. Just as Sam's crying anticipates his summary execution, so too does the baby's natal cry—which conventionally signifies life and joy for the mother and her attendants—portends his death and his family's devastation. When Mindy hears the baby's first cry, she does not rejoice. Instead she waits anxiously, anticipating something more, something terrible because, as she explains to John, "I never did see [Liza] look like she looked tonight" (115).

As symbolically significant as the echoing cries are the imagistically similar depictions of the deaths themselves. Although, again, *Safe* does not dramatize Sam's lynching, it indicates that he is hung and, therefore, dies from asphyxiation. The doctor recounts that John's and Liza's newborn son dies from a similar deprivation of oxygen: "when I looked around again she had her hands about the baby's throat choking it. I tried to stop her, but its little tongue was already hanging from its mouth---it was dead!" (115). The doctor's vivid language would seem to undermine my argument about the play's rejection of graphic violence but I would counter that there are no accompanying stage directions for the visual dramatization of the child's death. The play offers only the mediating figure of the doctor and his words. In this role, the doctor concludes his description of the birth-death scene: "Then she began, she kept on muttering over and over again 'now he's safe—safe from the lynchers! Safe!'" Anticipating the lynchers' rope around her son's neck sometime in the future, Liza uses her own hands in its stead. And in this figurative substitution of weapons, Johnson suggests an exploration of the significant consequences of the ways in which victims of racial trauma may, in turn,

internalize and enact modes of violence—even if motivated by the determination to protect rather than destroy—that reproduce the primary instances of violation, thereby extending the cycles of trauma that undermine the viability of African American individuals and communities. Dr. Jenkins, the sole witness to the infanticide and a representative of racial and socioeconomic advancement through his professional identification, only “stands, a picture of helplessness”; John, the now childless father, weeps; and, in a posture of stupefied defeat, Mindy, “stooped with misery, drags her feet heavily toward” her daughter’s room (115).

Safe offers no voice of recrimination that overrides this final tableau of agonized despair—a familial scene of grief and mourning that expands into a communal one, embodied by the figure of Dr. Jenkins. Yet, although Johnson does not include any implicit or explicit moral condemnation of Liza’s act, her depiction of the lynching and the infanticide in such a symbolically reflective manner compels her audience to recognize the infanticide as an act of internalized violence that debilitates the black community and that has little or no contestatory effect on further white violence against black people. White violence has perverted black women’s desire to keep their children “safe” so that infanticide becomes a preemptive strike of protection from anticipated violence. But, paradoxically, in their attempt to retrieve their maternal prerogative of protection, black women may appropriate similar methods of violence that ultimately destroy their children *and* their own maternal subjectivity. This dual destruction, in turn, aggrieves and disables a community that sees in its murdered children and traumatized mothers its enduring vulnerability to white domination. Not surprisingly, *Safe* does not

offer a triumphant denouement because, while in this racial context infanticide signifies a reclamation of self-authorized black maternal protection against lynching's violence, it simultaneously figures personal, familial and communal devastation.

Both Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké imagined maternal infanticide as a dramatic and narrative strategy that would forcefully represent the carnage that white supremacist violence, specifically in the form of lynching, wrought on African Americans. Their assessment of the ideological resonance of motherhood for their anticipated audience engendered their strategic presentation of a traumatized maternal figure who in turn violates herself and her son in her desperate desire to protect him. Maternal infanticide, then, underscores both the extent of black horror at lynching atrocities and the extreme measures black mothers might employ in order to prevent their children's and their own anticipated violation. Writing during a period of racial tyranny that persisted in spite of collective anti-supremacist activism, neither Johnson nor Grimké seemed able to imagine an ending, a safe future beyond the lynching and infanticide, beyond the violence and counterviolence. Accordingly, both "The Closing Door" and *Safe* conclude with images of helplessness, madness, death and grief. Significantly, not only the babies' cries are smothered and strangled, but the mothers' voices, too, are silenced. No familial or communal character articulates an aspirational plan of action, offering only a descriptive commentary on the events that have unfolded. The absence of an alternative communal response remains all the more remarkable when one considers that the contemporary Great Migration of African Americans was, at least in part, a refusal to endure the South's terrorism. Perhaps neither Johnson nor Grimké was

convinced that this mass movement could be the solution since, as one of Grimké's characters angrily interrogates, "and have there been no lynchings in the North?" It remains possible also that neither Johnson's nor Grimké's work can be situated within the then-emerging migration narrative which identifies lynching as one of the primary reasons for the "flow" of African Americans from the South to the North. Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that Jean Toomer's 1923 collection *Cane* was "most responsible for establishing violence on the black body as a trope to signify the violence of the South as the major catalyst for migration."¹⁵² *Cane*, then, codified a particularized literary inscription of a historical development that was well under way during Johnson's and Grimké's writing which suggests that the haunting maternal and communal silence in the aftermath of the infanticides in these texts reveals the authors' strategic exclusion of a collective black response that many hoped would sufficiently challenge the entrenched racial violence. Together, the silence and the exclusion re-inscribe a black trauma that is continuously present and posit a black future that is already eviscerated.

¹⁵²'Who Set You Flowing'?: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 25.

CHAPTER 4

**“Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?”: Examining the Aftermath of
Infanticide**

“The Closing Door”’s Agnes despairs that “no colored child, born or unborn—will be safe—in this country” (275). Johnson’s chosen title for her play *Safe* announces her protagonist’s articulated motivation for strangling her son. One of *It’s Mornin’s* characters clarifies his comprehension of Cissie’s preference for her daughter’s premature journey to “Hebben” rather than that daughter’s endurance of the living hell of slavery by invoking scriptural tradition: “‘Lam’s in His Bos’m—safe’” (93). Finally, *Beloved*’s Sethe explains her actions very simply to Paul D.: “‘I took and put my babies where they’d be safe’” (164). If, as one scholar asserts, the “cultural construction of trauma...begins with a claim...to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process”¹⁵³ then the four infanticidal texts constitute these writers’ determination to represent an African American traumatic crisis that has at its foundation the negation of the “fundamental” right to safety and, therefore, the mothers’ “terrifying” recognition that black life is endangered life, their children routinely exposed to white supremacist violence. The recurring trope of “safety” pronounces the writers’ insistence that a

¹⁵³Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 11.

mother's realization of her powerlessness to protect her offspring from ongoing racial and sexual violence forces an assertion of a maternal prerogative that takes the form of child murder. For these black mothers, safety equals death.

Yet the trauma of living while black began with enslavement. The centuries-long reign of terror that laid the foundation for the growth of the lynching industry—and every other racial regime since the proclamation of its official demise—attempted to eviscerate the most fundamental aspects of black subjectivity or personhood. Slavery's ever-present violence threatened black people's corporeality as it simultaneously sought to ensure their psychic and cultural annihilation, or what has come to be known as their collective “social death.”¹⁵⁴ In *It's Mornin'* and *Beloved*, Shirley Graham and Toni Morrison re-imagine this scene of social nihilism and, like their dramatic and literary contemporaries and predecessors who interrogated the traumatic effects of lynching's violence on African Americans, both authors deploy a maternal infanticide at the center of their configurations of slavery in order to examine the complexity of African Americans' resistance to the institution's endemic violence and their inveterate violations.

Slavery, Ron Eyerman emphasizes, almost always functions as the “primal scene” to which black “intellectuals” return in their symbolic efforts to codify the ‘meaning struggle’—which involves identifying the ‘nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility’—of the evolution of African American collective

¹⁵⁴Although Orlando Patterson's comparative scholarship builds on that of others in his analysis of the relationship between enslavement and the “paradoxical” (re)production of a “nonbeing” who has “no social existence outside of his master,” his work has firmly established this concept in the Black Atlantic/African American context. *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 38.

memory and identity.¹⁵⁵ Written in 1940 and 1987 respectively, both *It's Mornin'* and *Beloved* deploy the figure of the infanticidal mother in their figurative return to slavery in order to explore the traumatizing effects of racial and sexual violence on black people as individuals and as members of their communities. In both these slave texts, the preoccupation with the absence of safety centers primarily on black girls and women although Morrison's novel—for both formal and ideological reasons, I would argue—extends its more comprehensive representation to incorporate black men as well.

Unlike Grimké's *Rachel* and "The Closing Door" and Johnson's *Safe*—texts that were written during the very period of lynching's terror—Graham's and Morrison's explorations of white violence and black trauma followed slavery's legal dissolution by decades. Their individual artistic proclivities aside, each author's return to slavery underscores, as noted above, their participation in a larger cultural project of identifying and comprehending the role of enslavement in the formation of a collective African American identity. An understanding of this formation is not limited, however, to the primary historic period—i.e. the era of legal enslavement—but extends to the contemporary cultural contexts of the texts' productions and publications. In other

¹⁵⁵*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3. While I harbor some skepticism about Eyerma's premise that the cultural traumatic process that informed the development of an African American identity was the post-Reconstruction "rejection" of African Americans rather than the multiple "institutions" and strategies that slaves and their descendants developed *during* and after slavery, I have found useful his expansive recognition of slavery as the primary symbolic site to which every generation of African American cultural workers—in his word, "intellectuals"—has returned in order to (re)create a traumatized cultural identity through a process of interpretation. That is to say, artists, writers, political activists, musicians, poets, scholars and so on have revealed the traumatic meanings of enslavement through a multigenerational and multivocal discursive project.

words, we must inquire, in what ways might figurative discourses of blackness as well as the material lives of black people in the 1930s and 1980s—as well as the years leading up to these periods—inform the writers’ symbolic attempts to explicate the ongoing traumatic legacies of slavery in the United States?

Although her work is not routinely associated with the New Negro Movement, Shirley Graham wrote most of her plays, including *It’s Mornin’*, in the waning years of that cultural development. Her all-black opera, *Tom-Tom: An Epic of Music and the Negro*, had its premier in July 1932 before an audience of approximately 10,000 people in Cleveland, Ohio. The first opera to have been produced by an African American woman, *Tom Tom* “traces African music through to the United States,” a result of Graham’s determination to become “an authority on African rhythms.”¹⁵⁶ Graham’s father, an African Methodist Episcopal minister and, later, an administrator at a missionary college in Liberia, had encouraged her interest in African music and culture which she studied formally at the Sorbonne, among other institutions. No doubt, Graham’s familially-inspired engagement with African cultural traditions intersected with contemporary primitivist discourses *and* their detractors as well as with the energetic racial pride of Garveyism’s “Back-to-Africa” pronouncements. I isolate these iterations of blackness from the 1920s and 1930s in order to contextualize the figuration of an authoritative African presence in Graham’s drama of infanticide. Together with this Africanist presence, the play’s unfolding on a “plantation in the Deep South” on “the night of December 31, 1862,” the eve of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation,

¹⁵⁶*Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, 79-80. All citations of the play refer to this collection.

expresses Graham's desire to interrogate how an African heritage combined with an enslaved American experience and its aftermath created a black community that must confront the traumatizing effects of its historical and contemporary violation and its responses to that continuing violence.

Whereas the lynching plays explore the immediate impact of white violence but only begin to suggest the post-traumatic effects of maternal infanticide on the family and the larger community of which the family of the dead baby boy forms a part, *It's Mornin'* (and *Beloved* which I will discuss at length later) locates this examination as a central concern. In doing so, the play highlights maternal identity as it is (in)formed by women's and girls' sexual violation as the primary figuration through which it seeks to understand black trauma. Hence, *It's Mornin'* places itself within an African American symbolic tradition that began with the nineteenth-century slave narratives' identification of white male heterosexual violence as a systemic weapon of assault and domination with which black people must contend.¹⁵⁷ The gendered specificity of this violence within slavery, then, determines *It's Mornin'*'s identification of the murdered black child as female. Yet Graham's focus on the lives of black women and girls—taking place as it did in the 1930s—accomplishes another significant effect. Her emphasis inscribes a female-

¹⁵⁷The history of white men's institutionalized sexual violence against black women certainly informs such symbolic attention but I wish to point out that, interestingly, this particular form of what might be called intimate violence remains the most representable one in African American art. A few instances such as Harriet Jacobs' intimation of white male homosexual violence, Gayl Jones' brief portrayal of lesbian violence between the Portuguese mistress and Great-Gram and Morrison's depiction of the oral gang rape of Paul D's chained companions notwithstanding, Kara Walker's visual art stands out for its straightforward imagination of nonheterosexual violence within the context of slavery. It would seem, then, that even when imagining violence, heterosexuality remains the norm.

centered corollary—or, perhaps, urgent response—to the contemporary focus on the lynching of black males as the preeminent mode of violence against African Americans. By returning to the symbolically weighted eve of Emancipation, *It's Mornin'* (re)situates ongoing sexual and racial violence against black women—which did not receive comparative discursive contestation as lynching—within a larger context of historic violence.

Unknown to most of the tight-knit community of slaves, Cissie, the main character, has thrown a great party with “much cooking, music and laughter,”¹⁵⁸ and the “dancing of young people” not to welcome in the New Year but because she has learned that the plantation’s mistress, has sold Millie, her fourteen-year-old daughter.¹⁵⁹ Cissie has planned the celebration so that “Millie’ll be happy one time mo” before mother and daughter are separated (88). When the other slaves comprehend the real reason for the party—“they’re coming for her at daybreak” (88)—they, like Cissie, are saddened but resigned, plaintively calling out, in the words of Phoebe, as she “rock[s] her body,” “Mussy, Jesus! He’p us, Lawd!” (89). Grannie Lou, the oldest slave on the plantation, however, insists that Millie “don’—hab—tuh—go!” She explains that Cissie could kill her daughter like another “oman long gone” who killed her three sons rather than

¹⁵⁸A celebration that is reminiscent of Baby Sugg’s feast in *Beloved*. In both texts, the communal commemoration figures as the final expression of collective joy before the shattering trauma of the infanticide.

¹⁵⁹The first day of the year functioned routinely as a day of familial and communal rupture—and, consequently, trauma—because on that day slaveholders sent or took away those slaves who had been sold. Graham’s choice, therefore, of the play’s timing—the eve of 1863—inscribes multiple layers of ironic poignancy to Cissie’s murder of her daughter and to the recognition that in the midst of the Civil War, slavery’s structures remained very much in place.

acquiesce to their sale “down ribbah” (90). The other slaves are appalled that Grannie Lou would offer the story of “some cane-choppin’ heathen” as an imitable model of maternal protection and dismiss Grannie Lou as “crazy,” but Cissie does not. She resolves that killing Millie is preferable to having her sold to a man who already has leered at her “lak a beast what’s scented fresh, young meat” (89). When, at daybreak, Cissie hears the approach of a man on horseback, she assumes the predatory slave trader has arrived to seize her daughter. Taking advantage of the other slaves’ distraction, she goes into the room in which Millie is sleeping and cuts her throat. Only after she emerges from the room, “her face a mask of ebony, with set, unseeing eyes” and “holding in her arms the limp body of Millie” does she learn that the horse had brought not the slave trader but a Union soldier to announce the slaves’ freedom. The play ends with Cissie’s “cry of anguish as she falls to her knees” when she realizes the horror of her situation (95).

It’s Mornin’ emphatically locates Cissie’s own sense of her maternal identity as that of primary protector of her daughter’s emergent sexuality almost as soon as the stage directions require the curtain’s rise.¹⁶⁰ Graham’s characterization of black motherhood was not inconsequential at a time when black girls and women were stigmatized as hypersexual “Jezebels” and the black “maternal” figuration that was most widely circulated was that of “Mammy,” epitomized in David Selznick’s 1939 cinematic

¹⁶⁰My research has uncovered a Prompt Book for February 1940 productions of Graham’s play in the Special Collections of the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library at Yale University. According to these papers, students enrolled in the University’s Department of Drama were scheduled to perform *It’s Mornin’* on February 5, 6, and 7th under the direction of Frederick Coe, himself a student.

adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone With The Wind*.¹⁶¹ Selznick's film followed John Stahl's 1934 popular melodrama, *Imitation of Life*, which was based on Fannie Hurst's 1933 novel of the same title. Those two texts also exploited their black maternal figures as mammies. When Millie, "posing in doorway, her golden brown body half revealed by the thin dress," invites Sam to join her under the mistletoe, Cissie reacts "savagely" (85-86). She warns Sam, "Don' you touch mah gal!" and vehemently asserts "with pain" that "Millie don't know nothin' bout love!" in response to Grannie Lou's observation that "Da Jack done call in the moonlight and da young gal's love come down" (86). In a reminder of Linda Brent's account of slave mothers' vigilance at the onset of their daughters' pubescent sexuality, Phoebe observes that, for Cissie, "Millie's lak a flower; she watch her day an' night."¹⁶² But, once again, the play positions Grannie Lou as the preeminent voice of communal memory and authority with her articulation of Cissie's personal history which emphasizes that Cissie's fears for Millie are based on her own experience of sexual violation.

¹⁶¹See Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films*. (New York: Viking Press, 1973); K. Sue Jewell's *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images & the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy*. (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁶²Fearful that their daughters were vulnerable to sexual victimization from both black and white men, black mothers and grandmothers continued their vigilance beyond the era of enslavement, as Graham's contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston depicted in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In a scene that anticipates Cissie's violent response to Sam and Millie's romantic attraction, Janie's grandmother, Nanny who had given birth to her master's child weeks before the end of the Civil War, perceives a mutual kiss between her granddaughter and Johnny Taylor as a "laceration" on his part. She immediately resolves to ensure Janie's "protection" from any other non-marital sexual interactions by marrying her off to the much older and financially-established Logan Killicks whose social position offers the kind of middle-class respectability Nanny herself had never enjoyed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. (New York: First Perennial Library Edition, 1990), pp. 11-20.

The other slaves give little credit to Grannie Lou's memory that Cissie had been a vivacious girl who could sing "jes lak huh gal" because they have known her only as a "gaunt, black figure" with "something strangely harsh about her voice" and who never seems capable of expressing joy (86).

Women: (astonished) Cissie! Sing?

Grannie Lou: Yes, Cissie! She was beautiful! Black as a berry an' lovely as da night. Slender an' swift as a young colt. She nevah walk, jes' prance an' run about da place. Ah seen da buckra eyein' huh, an' she jes' laf. Den come a day when she war very still. Ah donno why, til one night seen huh slippin' t'rough shadows lak a hounded coon crawls tuh his hole to lick his bleedin' wounds¹⁶³ (86).

It's Mornin' underscores white male rape as a form of sexual and racial terrorization, not romantic desire, in its dramatization of the overseer's violent rupture of Cissie's flesh and in his determination to "break her will" (86). His repeated rape of young Cissie shatters her so completely that although her corporeal wounds heal, her spiritual ones never do. Here, I use "spiritual" not in its religious sense, of course, but rather to refer to Cissie's energetic and effervescent psychic and emotional constitution that enables Grannie Lou's metaphor of the "young colt," a complimentary rather than derogatory characterization of a young, enslaved black girl in this context. Without

¹⁶³Here, too, Graham's play echoes Hurston's novel—with a significant difference. Whereas Grannie Lou recounts a white overseer's rape of Cissie, Hurston's Nanny remembers a black man's rape of her daughter, Leafy: "'De next mornin' she come crawlin' in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run on off just before day.'" Ibid. p. 18. Written within three years of each other, the two texts trace the history and ongoing incidence of interracial and intraracial sexual violence in black women's lives.

minimizing the physical repercussions of the “buckra’s” violence—besides enduring the repeated violation of her body, Cissie carries and gives birth to Millie, the resulting child of the rapes—the play, I would argue, identifies this spiritual trauma—symbolized by Cissie’s “stillness” and transformed voice¹⁶⁴—as the source of both her desire to protect her daughter and her capacity to accept murder as a legitimate form of maternal protection.

Graham deploys the singing voice as a significant symbol of individual vitality as well as communal spiritedness and cohesion in *It’s Mornin’*. Incorporating her academic study of music as well as her upbringing as the daughter of an African Methodist Episcopal minister in whose congregations she would have learned and sung Negro Spirituals, Graham structures the play with several of the same songs—particularly ones which embody the call-and-response tradition that highlights the interdependence of the

¹⁶⁴Reminiscent of Ursa’s characterization in *Corregidora*. Similar to *Corregidora* as well as *It’s Mornin’*’s disinclination to examine the potential, indeed probable, ambivalence that a mother may feel about a child who was conceived during sexual assault. Two reasons might account for this reluctance. First, a text which harnesses maternalist discourses in order to interrogate black maternal exclusion and violation might find it particularly challenging to represent an empathetic figure whose anguish about her denigration as a mother coexists with, or is even superseded by, her conflicting emotions about mothering a daughter whose existence is an ongoing reminder of her sexual violation. Second, public, feminist politicizations of rape that intersected with issues around reproductive autonomy (birth control, abortion, etc.) in the United States only began to emerge in the early-mid 1970s, represented by, for example, Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) and Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide when the Rainbow was Enuf* (1975). Earlier politicizations of rape which took place during the lynching crisis did not draw explicit connections between rape and unwanted motherhood. The infancy of such a socio-political discourse at the time of *Corregidora*’s writing and its absence during *It’s Mornin’*’s dramatization may have made it difficult for the authors of these texts to explore the nexus at which black interracial maternal anger could intersect with black intraracial maternal ambivalence.

individual and the community. As “Cripple Jake” plays his banjo, for example, Millie performs as the soloist who encourages supportive mutuality while the other slaves reply together with an equally determined exhortation of perseverance.

Oh! Walk togeddar, Chillun
 (Group) Don’ you get weary,
 Walk togeddar, chillun
 (Group) Don’ you get weary... (86).

Later on, when the play’s audience and its characters—Millie excepting—comprehend Cissie’s resolve to defy her mistress’ plans to sell her daughter, Graham introduces the paradigmatic biblical narrative of the underdog’s fight against the powerful through song. Again, Millie sings the solo while the community responds:

Lil’ King David playin’ on his harp
 (Group) Some boy! Oh! Some boy!
 Lil’ King David playin’ on his harp
 (Group) Some boy! Oh! Some boy!...
 Ole Goliah comin’ right along
 (Group) Some Boy! Oh! Some boy!... (91).

Significantly, the slaves’ musical version of this power struggle ends before it re-inscribes David’s triumph over the stronger Goliath, thereby revealing Graham’s ambivalence about the biblical story’s full suitability to the African American situation both within the world of the play and, figuratively, within the context of the Civil War,

manumission and their attendant promise of comprehensive black empowerment. Such reservations notwithstanding, the song's inclusion emphasizes communal spiritedness and personal vitality.

Importantly, too, the singing voice symbolizes intergenerational maternal pride, defiance and resistance. Although the unnamed African woman lived many years before Cissie and they shared no blood relations, she functions as Cissie's figurative mother whose recounted attitude and behavior authorize Cissie's own actions. Grannie Lou emphasizes that, like Cissie, the woman who was "straight from the jungles in da far off Africa" used to "sing out in da fields" until the announced sale of her sons. As she did with Cissie, Grannie Lou also employs comparable, animalistic imagery of venerated qualities of strength and agility to characterize the African woman: "Dat war a 'oman—straight lak tree, an' tall, swift as a lion an' strong as any ox" (90). Grannie Lou serves as an intermediary maternal figure of communal memory and knowledge—embodied in her very name—whose representation of another, almost mythic maternal subject engenders a model of resistance that Cissie can adopt for her own violated maternal position.

Neither Cissie nor the African woman is an isolated maternal figure within the slave community, however, and each woman's decision to murder her child/children as a simultaneous act of resistance and assertion of maternal prerogative has communal implications. Again, *It's Mornin'*'s development of the role of the community anticipates *Beloved's* extensive exploration of this concern, especially as it relates to its members' profound understanding of black pain, empathy for the mothers and, relatedly, its reluctance to denounce their extreme attempts of child protection. Grannie Lou recalls

that when the slaveholders announced the sale of the woman's sons, "she say deh nebbah go. Da white folk laf, but niggahs dassent laf...dey see huh face. She don' say not'in' mo', but go away" (90). Grannie Lou's recollection depicts a marked contrast between the enslavers' blindness to the woman's defiance—an obtuseness that derives from a conviction in their own omnipotence and, correspondingly, the enslaved woman's presumed powerlessness. The slaves, on the other hand, who identify with the mother's violation can "read" her face and newly emergent silence correctly for the resistance that these signs augur. Yet their comprehension of the woman's intentions does not lead to intervention. No one attempts to stop the killings, a shared reluctance that indicates the community's tacit recognition of maternal authority within the context of a regime in which a parent can be separated permanently from her children without recourse to legal or cultural appeal.

Cissie's community, too, realizes her intention to kill Millie and, within the hours of the drama's temporal frame, has ample time to debate her sanity and ethical obligations while she stares "fixedly at the long knife which Fess has tossed on the table, confirms its "sharp[ness]" and "puts the knife inside her dress" (90-91). Although in their dramatic composition as a Greek Chorus, most of the women condemn Cissie's decision—"She'll be a murderess!" "She'll bu'n in hell!" (93)—other slaves counter that slavery's brutality precludes an unequivocal judgment of such a reclamation of maternal protection:

Aunt Sue: But Cissie kain't...

Fess: (*fiercely*) Why not? Po' Millie's dancin' days am gone. Cissie know 'bout pain dat breaks an' keep on breakin' till dey ain't nothing left...(*sadly*) Ah donno. Right now, Ah'm all mixed up (92).

Fess expresses ambivalence about the moral soundness of Cissie's particular assertion of maternal autonomy but he incisively identifies the threat of annihilation that grows out of the repetitive violence that ruptures black lives. With his attention to the intergenerational continuity of black pain, he articulates the play's inscription of the development of black trauma. Moreover, Fess' empathetic understanding of the consequences of black women's sexual violation—without any expression of masculinist proprietorial claims—reveals the play's insistence that sexual assault in slavery and after its abolition must be recognized as a terrorizing weapon against women and their communities—in much the same way that lynching was understood as a weapon of terror against (primarily) black men and their communities. It is as though Graham deploys the thoughtfully empathetic Fess in order to instruct the play's potential male audience that the historic trauma of rape should not be minimized but—equally important—violence against black women in their own time must not be responded to as aggression against “their” women. When black men engage in such discursive contestations of sexual assault, they reify themselves, not black women, as the victims.

While Cissie's killing of Millie represents her fierce determination to protect her daughter from traumatic suffering, the play's revelation of her “mistake”—that the white man on horseback is a Union soldier not a slave trader—and the slaves' responses signal Graham's rumination on several issues. First, in the sixty plus years between

Emancipation and *It's Mornin'*'s development, what might once have been imagined as the straightforward manumission of slaves had turned out to be a difficult and often violent social and political process, including the withdrawal of Union troops that had ensured African American protection and the post-Reconstruction reconciliation between the white North and white South.¹⁶⁵ This postbellum racial appeasement sanctioned the national subjugation of African Americans along economic, social and political lines, including Black Codes, legal segregation, sharecropping, lynching, race riots, sexual violence, and so forth. In short, the “morning” of Emancipation had too often turned into a nightmare for the former slaves and two or three generations of their descendants.

Second, the slaves' reactions express the play's consideration of the intracommunal effects of self-directed black violence even when the community acknowledges that violence as defense and/or resistance. Millie, after all, is not only Cissie's daughter but also a member of the larger community. As the character who so cogently expresses the development of black trauma as a consequence of white brutality *and* the first witness to Millie's death, Fess registers the communal trauma of maternal violence when he retreats from the bloody infanticidal scene, “his hand before his eyes, his whole body expressing agony.” When the women “drop to their knees” and “rock their bodies and moan” in despair, Uncle Dave, the elderly male figure of religious authority, loses his power of speech, unable to utter “free” as the “word chokes in his throat” (94). *It's Mornin'* emphasizes that Cissie's violence also produces pain that debilitates the community, effectively extending its psychic and social vulnerabilities.

¹⁶⁵Thus making the soldier and the slave trader symbolically interchangeable—at least in post-Reconstruction terms.

This dramatization recalls the lynching texts and, like them, suggests that although white brutality and black violence-as-resistance must not be equated in so far as the latter represents despairing assertions of maternal protection and autonomy, writers and playwrights have identified their interconnectedness as a crucial space in which they can develop their symbolic examinations of *compounded* trauma and its role in the (de)generation of black subjectivity. That is, these writers have recognized the figurative possibilities of exploring the overlapping and aggregate disabling effects of African Americans' experience and use of violence in related interracial and intraracial situations.

Finally, *It's Mornin'* insists on our recognition that slavery's traumas have exceeded the temporal boundaries of legal enslavement and have borne legacies with which successive generations of African Americans must contend. It does so, of course, in Graham's selection of the liminal space between slavery and emancipation as the setting of her play as well as in the irresolutions—the unarticulated questions—of the play's ending. Where might such newly emancipated slaves go and who will they become? How would “bewilderment” and “anguish” continue to shape a woman-as-mother like Cissie and her community (94)? How might a community of former slaves relate to each other after such traumatic “shattering” (94)? Will they transmit their memories of slavery and its debilitating effects? Will their attempts at transmission be enabled or silenced? Perhaps Graham's chosen form for *It's Mornin'*—the short play—and her own historical moment—relatively close to slavery's ending—determined only the possibility/intimation of such questions. Four decades later, however, Toni Morrison seemed to have fully recognized the centrality of such questions in any effort to explore

the formation of African American subjectivity. Her novel *Beloved* echoes Graham's play in significant imagistic and thematic ways but goes further to construct an extensive meditation on maternal and communal trauma that powerfully imagines complex answers to those questions even as it generates more inquiries about the ongoing generation of African American subjectivity.

Like *It's Mornin's* Cissie, *Beloved's* maternal protagonist Sethe murders her daughter by cutting her throat in order to protect the child from the multiple forms of degradation she had endured throughout her enslavement. Towards the end of each text, both mothers misidentify a white male advocate for black emancipation as the brutal enslaver whose determination to preserve the violent system of black subjugation that they resolve to oppose with counter-violence. Whereas Cissie's mistake has the potential effect of tempering the horror of her dilemma with its concluding tableau of tragic pathos, Sethe's mistaken assault of Mr. Bodwin, an abolitionist, revises her earlier, murderous resistance to Schoolteacher's determination to re-enslave her and her children not only because Bodwin is not Schoolteacher, her former master, but, more significantly, because Sethe directs her violence outward, against the presumed oppressor rather than inward, against herself or her surviving child. With this revision of the scene that Stamp Paid calls "the Misery"—Sethe's attempt to kill all four of her children and herself—the concluding pages of *Beloved* suggest that Sethe's emergent acceptance and psychic integration of her traumatized past has begun to enable a re-conceptualization of protection that rejects self-mutilation and self-destruction as empowering acts of black resistance. In her inscription of this re-conceptualization, Morrison emphasizes that

while Sethe's earlier violent rage was comprehensible—perhaps even justified—it was also misdirected. Relatedly, the revision of the infanticide indicates that, at least symbolically, outward-directed resistance was an imperative that might have saved Sethe's daughter and prevent the disintegration of her family. Finally, Morrison's inclusion of the thirty women in this climactic moment of Sethe's and the community's transformation denotes the author's insistence that black resistance has to be collective in order to be effective.

Like its antecedents, *Beloved* engages infanticide as an African American motif through which maternal subjectivity can be examined by exploring that violent response as an assertion of black maternal resistance against white tyranny. Morrison's novel, however, most profoundly extends and transforms these earlier inscriptions of infanticide by focusing not only on the initiating white violence but by constructing the infanticide itself as a traumatic effect—a visible sign of enduring and unendurable psychic pain that continues beyond the termination of the originating violence. It further develops and centralizes the infanticide's traumatic aftermath as the symbolic space through which the collective—individual, familial and communal—consequences of external and internal violence intersect and diverge. With its expansive and shifted focus to the issue of collective trauma through its figuration of both the Sweet Home slave farm and the nominally free black Cincinnati community—even as it simultaneously examines the “unlivable” life of its primary maternal figure, Sethe (173)—*Beloved* insists on our recognition of the relational formation of black maternal subjectivity. As Valerie Smith observes, “Morrison does not provide her people with the option of living underground,

in isolation, beyond community. Her characters achieve autonomy and a sense of identity only to the extent that they can understand themselves in relation to a social unit, be it family, neighborhood, or town.”¹⁶⁶ *Beloved* contends that a woman’s maternal identity is not self-contained or self-generated and, therefore, cannot be understood only or even primarily as an individual woman’s relationship with her child/ren. Rather, insofar as a black mother is part of a larger community, her maternal identity derives both from black communal values and claims as well as her own personal considerations and desires. Important, too, are the various ways in which a woman and her community must necessarily negotiate their definitions of motherhood within an oppressive institution like slavery whose economic and cultural beneficiaries reduce black mothering to biological reproduction or, as in the period of *Beloved*’s writing and publication, vilify black women as welfare cheats and neglectful crack addicts who did not deserve their children or the title of “mother.” Accordingly, when a woman’s maternal claims become excessive to the extent that she recognizes no other prerogatives or connections other than her own will and desires or, conversely, when the community neglects its responsibilities to nurture and protect a mother’s legitimate claims, the reciprocal failure of acknowledgement and care enables the kind of crises that traumatize the maternal subject as well as what Morrison has referred to as the “tribe.”¹⁶⁷ The circumstances surrounding

¹⁶⁶*Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 123. While Smith specifically discusses Morrison’s first three novels here, her analysis certainly applies to all of Morrison’s novels, including *Beloved*.

¹⁶⁷In an interview with Thomas LeClair after the 1977 publication of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison responded to LeClair’s inquiry about her self-perception as a writer: “I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, the tribe. Peasant literature for *my* people, which is necessary and legitimate” (her emphasis). Several years later, following the publication of *Tar Baby*, she discussed

Sethe's murder of her older daughter and attempted murder of her other three children constitute such a rupture. *Beloved's* examination of the infanticide and its aftermath asserts that—given the immensity of the black trauma that has followed both extra- and intra-communal violence—collective, “tribal” healing practices in the form of concerted acts of nurture and care offer the *potential* to create and affirm healthy black maternal and communal subjects.

Beloved highlights the significance of the infanticide in the traumatization and subsequent degeneration of its black community by offering its first, extensive account of the child's death not from Sethe's perspective but with its primary representation of the viewpoint that Baby Suggs, the dead baby's grandmother, maintains of herself and her community. The novel accentuates Baby Suggs' perspective through the account of the celebratory feast she initiates, delineating her role as a communal gatherer—one who strives to bring members of the community together through nurturing acts of generosity and support—while revealing the tensions that can arise between such an individual and the community when the latter cannot fully embrace its own worthiness of such considered kindness. *Beloved* consistently represents Baby Suggs' “great big old heart” (89, 157) as one generous enough to nurture both her family and her community.

Son's and Jadine's development in terms of “whether he or she was really a member of the tribe.” Noting the class overtones of her framework, I would affirm that Morrison's oeuvre consistently foregrounds the culture and intraracial dynamics of African Americans, refusing whiteness the dominant place it retains in so many literary and extraliterary structures. Thomas LeClair, “‘The Language Must Not Sweat’: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” and Nellie McKay, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” both included in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993), pp. 369-377; pp. 396-411.

Accordingly, she turns the celebration she had hoped to make if her son Halle successfully escaped his enslavement into one for the community in order to honor the novel's other community gatherer, her male counterpart, Stamp Paid.¹⁶⁸ The latter had offered "his labor and his love" (136) by pushing through the "brambles lined with blood-drawing thorns" (Ibid) to gather the berries that would, in turn, honor Denver, Baby Suggs' last grandchild and one of *Beloved*'s primary figurations of the manumitted community's complicated present and future survival.

Never one to keep too much "for one's own," Baby Suggs' extends her graciousness to the "ninety people" on Bluestone whose initial "laughter [and] goodwill" indicates a nascent willingness to celebrate themselves and each other. The community's "anger"¹⁶⁹ that follows the feast and that allows it to misinterpret Baby Suggs' nurturing gesture as one of "reckless generosity" (137), however, underscores its still fragile formation in a post-slavery world¹⁷⁰—its inability to accept that it and, therefore, any of its own deserves commemoration or has the power to love expansively:

¹⁶⁸In her figuration of Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid's relationship—"the mountain to his sky" (170)—Morrison intervenes into the recriminatory discourse that shaped the black cultural landscape, especially the reception of black women's literature, in the 1970s and 1980s. Morrison presents a relationship model but, provocatively, one not based on romance. This characterization speaks to the period's interrogation of black heterosexual relations and suggests an alternative space for productive black inter-gender collaboration that could eschew the potential tensions of romance and/or sexual relations.

¹⁶⁹Morrison inscribes "anger" three times, along with its synonym, "furious," in less than one and a half pages, thereby emphasizing its importance and potency.

¹⁷⁰Even as I use the term "post-slavery" to identify Bluestone's communal formation on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio as opposed to a slaveholding state like Kentucky "on the bloody side of the Ohio river" (31), we recognize the community's liminal status through Morrison's focus on the geographical proximity between the "free" North and the slave South. Morrison also sets the feast and the infanticide in 1855, six years before the

Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone (137).

Despite Baby Suggs' agreement that her excess produced the "free-floating repulsion" and "disapproving odor" of collective fury (138), I would argue that in this conflict between individual expression and communal standards, it is the latter which constitutes an area of lack that cannot countenance the elder's expansive love. After all, the expressions of intimate nurture that this passage enumerates are examples of those that the novel consistently identifies as essential to the black community's regenerative healing. But a group of people who routinely had been stigmatized as "trespassers among the human race" (125) cannot readily accept that an ex-slave could generate a love comparably powerful to that bestowed by Christ—"Loaves and fishes were His powers" (137)—the primary figure of suffering and generosity that the slave system had sanctioned for their devotion. Here, *Beloved* identifies the Christian narrative of Christ's singularity as a disempowering model for the community because its ideology seems to suggest that Baby Suggs' loving generosity can only be an emulation—perhaps even an usurpation—of Christ's powerful grace and, therefore, should be rejected.

beginning of the Civil War and eighteen years before the Reconstruction year of 1873 in which the novel opens, thus underscoring that such a community would include the free-born, the legally freed and fugitives like Sethe and her children. These temporal and spatial inscriptions emphasize the community's vulnerability to legally-sanctioned and extra-legal invasions as well as its economic and cultural marginalization.

The centrality of the feast and the ensuing communal disintegration also compels our attention to its commentary on late twentieth-century black relations in the United States, specifically, the 1980s, the period of the novel's development and publication. As I indicate above, my analysis of Graham's and Morrison's texts emphasizes considerations of the cultural periods of their representations as well as those of their writings and distribution. The 1970s and the early years of the 1980s brought not only regressive attempts to undermine the political, economic, and social gains of the Civil Rights Movement (sometimes referred to as the Second Emancipation). The period also marked the emergence of a nascent—but undeniable—fracture between the black middle-class and the black lower classes, the latter routinely characterized as the “underclass” or “inner-city” (rural black poverty has been, for the most part, discursively negated). Morrison already had situated this socio-economic splintering as one of her primary concerns in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981). Now, in *Beloved*, it would seem that Baby Suggs' “too big a house” with “two floors *and* a well,” the windfall of the Bodwins' patronage (137-38), symbolizes the contemporary African American middle class' migration to white suburbia and away from predominantly black, largely urban neighborhoods. The mutual class antagonism that grew out of this separation has been debilitating for all because, while the black middle class certainly has enjoyed unprecedented material privileges, its economic status remains relatively fragile—as every financial downturn reveals. The middle-class' socio-economic status, furthermore, does not guarantee its protection from racial antagonism despite many people's assumption that it should or would, denoted, surely, by Baby Suggs' confusion that the “whitefolks” had ignored all boundaries and “came in [her] yard” anyway (179).

Morrison also explores the roles and consequences for those in the lower classes who have suffered from both racial denigration and socio-economic marginalization. Such a deficiency of material resources and experiences of pain and isolation—their conviction that they have been abandoned by members of their own race—have produced a profound psycho-cultural crisis that has given rise to unprecedented “black-on-black” violence, the victims of which, Morrison insists, constitute a part of the “60 million and more” to which she dedicates *Beloved*. That number is infinitely large enough to encompass those who perished on their way to and during the Middle Passage, those who survived the Crossing as well as their descendants in the African Diaspora who, to varying degrees, continue to be marked by the legacies of violent, geographical removal and cultural dispossession. The representation of the Bluestone community’s self-destructive divisions and its “misdirected” anger at the “fat cats...[with] uncalled-for pride” (137), then, functions as much as a meditation on the contemporary necessity of black socio-political and cultural cohesion in the post-segregation era as it does on the post-Civil War era of the novel’s construction.

Beloved characterizes the Bluestone community’s inability to fully embrace its own and Baby Suggs’ value, of course, as an effect of its violated past and its continually threatened present, the psychic trace of its inveterate persecution. Together with the more extensive representations of the brutalized histories of its primary figures like Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Stamp Paid, the novel offers its readers brief but significant glimpses of signs or symptoms of trauma in its delineation of its secondary characters, emphasizing trauma’s omnipresence in mid-nineteenth-century black life. Thus *Beloved*

portrays “the woman in the bonnet who tended the baby and cried into her cooking” (93); “Aunt Phyllis, who slept with her eyes wide open;...Jackson Till, who slept under the bed” (97); “a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn’t remember living anywhere else;...a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies” (66); and Ella whose year-long abduction, imprisonment and rape by a father and son—“the lowest yet” (256)—engender her chilling philosophical principle: “‘If anybody was to ask me I’d say, Don’t love nothing’” (93). While *Beloved* does not suggest that the black community fully adopts Ella’s philosophy, it does establish as a central concern “the way internalization of oppressors’ values can distort all intimate human relationships,” as Deborah Ayer Sitter has concluded.¹⁷¹ The narrative stresses the devastation that this kind of internalized denigration can wreak by explicitly connecting Baby Suggs’ powerlessness to anticipate

¹⁷¹“The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*.” *African American Review* 26:1 (Spring 1992), p. 18. *Beloved* represents several characters’ diminished capacity to love as an act of emotional self-preservation in the face of slavery’s soul-destroying violence. Paul D “lov[ed] small and in secret” (221), directing his feelings toward insentient objects like trees because “a big love” for a person—“a woman, a child, a brother”—could “split you wide open” (162). Sethe admits that after her reunion with her children she “loved em more” and “proper” because “they wasn’t mine to love” during their enslavement in Kentucky. Even Baby Suggs, the primary figure of expansive love, could not and would not love her own children while enslaved because “anybody [she] knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (23). Only after she “stepped foot on free ground” does she discover “her own heartbeat” and transforms herself into the woman who has love enough for all (141). An exception to this repeated figuration of diminished love during enslavement is Sixo whose capacity for loving big reveals itself in his determined long-distance relationship with Patsy, the Thirty-Mile Woman. As with other particularities of Sixo’s characterization, the novel suggests that Sixo’s capacity to love extensively while enslaved comes from his birth in Africa, the “free ground” from which he was stolen. Both metaphorically and literally, intimate, free contact with the natural world awakens and sustains one’s ability to love without self-circumscription.

and thwart the slave catchers' attempt to recapture her family to the community's negation of its responsibility to offer protection: "...nobody ran on ahead; ...nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions. Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down or to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma'am's tit.¹⁷² Nobody warned them" (157). The Morrisonian rhythmic reiteration which shapes the several variants of "no" in the passage accentuates the community's complicity with this particular enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act and, therefore, its partial responsibility for Sethe's infanticidal resistance against it. The inscription of the "Look"—capitalized to indicate its institutionally pervasive presence—also illustrates collective survival knowledge that everyone chooses to ignore out of "meanness" (157). What the community does not fully comprehend is that its failure to utilize such "tribal" knowledge within a hegemonic structure that simultaneously targets the individual and the community may prove injurious not only to the individual and his or her family but to the larger collective unit as well. Thus as much as *Beloved* explores the traumatic effects of the infanticide on the Suggs family, it also examines the debilitating consequences for the area's black community, some of the novel's representatives of the "60 million and more."

¹⁷²In a text in which the presence and absence of a "ma'am's tit" carries such symbolic weight, we should not overlook its invocation in this section. To the degree to which the presence of the maternal figure can lay the foundation for an empowering sense of self, the community's failure to act here points, figuratively, to a collective absence of black mothers that undermines its sense of a collective self, tragically preventing its recognition of protection as an act of communal self-empowerment.

The cohesiveness of the community begins to unravel immediately after the child's death and even before Baby Suggs takes to her bed in order to ponder color¹⁷³—thereby depriving its members of her inspirational leadership and active love—because the violence of slavery that had “‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue’” (87) had now been compounded by the infanticide, the final traumatizing act that “‘broke my heartstrings too’” (89). As Sethe is taken away to jail, the people who finally had gathered to support her become silent, believing, the narrator indicates, that her proud bearing exceeds communal standards.

Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart

¹⁷³Morrison suggests that even one of the most elemental, sensory experiences of human existence—the visual perception of color—potentially poses an existential crisis for those forced into bondage. Whereas Sethe concludes that Baby Suggs wills her own death when she was “well into pink” because she could not bear to contemplate the bloody history any consideration of red would demand, Sethe also notes that the “pinkish headstone” of her daughter’s grave “was the last color I recall” (201). In his own 2007 neo-slave narrative, *The Book of Negroes*, the Afro-Canadian writer Lawrence Hill seems to have responded to Morrison’s interrogation of the presumed “harmlessness” of color with his own meditation on the color pink. His protagonist, Aminata Diallo—whose circuitous life’s journey the novel develops from West Africa and the Middle Passage to Carolinian enslavement and Novia Scotian and Sierra Leonian settlements and then, finally, London anti-slavery speaker and writer—admonishes readers of “African hue” to “cultivate distrust of the colour pink.” While “pink is taken as the colour of innocence,” its omnipresence in the sunsets of her Middle Passage crossing had forever ruined their beauty because underneath such natural grandeur, “lies a bottomless graveyard of children, mothers and men. I shudder to imagine all the Africans rocking in the deep.” *The Book of Negroes*. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 10. Both Morrison and Hill invert the familiar symbolics of the innocence and beauty associated with the elemental and natural world in order to emphasize slavery’s traumatic production of existential alienation, dread and mourning.

turned about, headed west to town. And then no words.
Humming. No words at all (152).

While the narrator seems to endorse the community's impression of Sethe's pride, the deployment of "probably" suggests that Sethe's bearing may not fully account for the community's withholding of its support. The absence of certitude encourages us to remember that the transgressive "excess" of which the community accuses Sethe here ("too high," "too straight") echoes its similar charge against Baby Suggs before the infanticide. Thus the failure to envelop Sethe with a fully supportive cultural expression, a lyrical song that might mitigate some of her pain and communicate communal empathy, if not approval, also recalls the collective abandonment of Baby Suggs. I would argue that the community's guilt about its role in the child's death, its latent recognition of its refusal to intercept Schoolteacher's intended violence, has as much to do with the punishment it bestows on Sethe as does Sethe's pride. At a seemingly improbable moment, Morrison portrays Sethe as the community's scapegoat, a recurring figure the author has deployed in her examination of transgressive female characters in her imagined black communities.¹⁷⁴

Morrison further emphasizes this section's significance in the portrayal of the community's post-infanticide disintegration through her revision of the scene towards the novel's end when the Bluestone women congregate in order to save Sethe from Beloved's parasitic tyranny. Indeed, the novel does not represent or allude to any

¹⁷⁴I think here primarily of Sula in the eponymous novel, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* as the well as the convent women in *Paradise*.

significant communal assembly after the infanticide until this gathering of the “thirty neighborhood women” (261). Utilizing the narrative device of circularity that structures so much of the novel’s thematic meditations and that functions to reinforce connections and clarifying echoes, the narrator invokes the pre-infanticide feast as the women make their way to rescue Sethe. They remember the bountiful food and joyful music as “Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more.” They also remember themselves, “young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day” (258). The revised and revived memory—a “rememory” in *Beloved*’s lexical framework—of Baby Suggs now having regenerated their sense of cohesion, the women arrive at Sethe’s home to offer finally the expressive succor they had once withheld:

When the music entered the window...it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash (261).¹⁷⁵

In a nicely nuanced reading of Morrison’s use of the trope of improvisation in *Beloved*, Arlene R. Keizer notes the “revisions of biblical language” in this passage and argues also that the “deep structure of African music” that has “been transformed through slavery and its aftermath” infuses the sound of “cultural harmony and integrity” that

¹⁷⁵Parts of this passage incorporate almost verbatim language from an earlier section when Sethe goes to the Clearing to seek Baby Suggs’ “long-distance love” and counsel: “the smell of leaves simmering in the sun, thunderous feet and the shouts that ripped pods off the limbs of the chestnuts. With Baby Suggs’ heart in charge, the people let go” (94).

results in Beloved's "exorcism" and, consequently, Sethe's salvation.¹⁷⁶ Keizer's thoughtful criticism focuses on the way the "sound" precipitates an evacuation—Beloved's disappearance—that, in turn, creates the space for the community's re-creation. Agreeing with Keizer, I also wish to highlight the way in which the women's powerful crescendo summons the spiritual presence of Baby Suggs, a figurative, empowering resurrection that facilitates the reunion of Sethe and her community.

Sethe's impression that the women's voices had conjured up the Clearing directs our attention to Baby's Suggs' ritualistic transformation of a secluded woodland space into a "wide-open" ceremonial terrain for collective healing from slavery's and racism's prevalent brutality (87). In an understandably oft-quoted, vernacular Call—*Beloved* insists that Baby Suggs did not "deliver sermons or preach" (177)—the "unchurched preacher"¹⁷⁷ urges "[her] people" to self- and communal love, insisting that this "prize" can only be attained through a tender reclamation of the black "flesh" that routinely had been "despised," "picked," "flayed" "tied," "chopped off," and "broken" (88), a discourse of the fragmentation and the "re-piecing [of] a shattered self" that Kalí Tal identifies as a

¹⁷⁶*Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 41.

¹⁷⁷Morrison's portrayal of Baby Suggs both invokes and re-conceptualizes Hurston's Nanny's unfulfilled desire to "preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me." (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), p. 15. While the silencing of black women in slavery as well as the Harlem Renaissance period of Hurston's writing understandably inform *Their Eyes*' characterization of Nanny's dream, Morrison's inheritance of a novel like Hurston's as well as the cultural, intellectual, and political production of countless African Americans enables her to imagine a "text" for Baby Suggs that differs from the one Nanny had "saved" for Janie. Morrison dismisses the elevated pulpit (even a figurative one) as superfluous, instead representing the Clearing as the appropriately regenerative space in which Baby Suggs, in the midst of her community, can help create a collective text of healing.

fundamental feature of the literature of trauma.¹⁷⁸ Baby Suggs, the community gatherer, insists that a cherished corporeality necessarily accompanies—perhaps precedes—psychic and emotional healing because the purported inferiority of black flesh has been used to justify black people’s repeated violation.¹⁷⁹ After concluding her Call with the exhortation to “love your heart,” Baby Suggs “stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others” responded with “their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh” (89).¹⁸⁰ Baby Suggs’ rhythmic undulation of her “twisted hip” has special significance because this permanently damaged part of her body materially and symbolically registers her own personal traumatization as an enslaved worker and mother. Her hip has been disabled by the difficult field labor into which she was forced before her sale to the Garners of Sweet Home farm and by the painful reproductive labor of giving birth to eight children, seven of whom were sold away from

¹⁷⁸*Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, p. 137-38.

¹⁷⁹In a remarkable confluence of African American discursive practices, Morrison’s (de)construction of the black body into its discrete pieces of “flesh” in order to, paradoxically, make it whole again has a contemporaneous critical partner in Hortense Spillers’ insistence that “contemporary critical discourses,” including dominant feminist criticism, not be allowed to ignore or erase the historical memory of the captivity and enslavement of African peoples as “high crimes against the *flesh*,...its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hold, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (her emphasis). Spiller’s essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” was published first in 1987, the same year of *Beloved*’s publication. Both texts demand that contemporary cultural and textual practices—reading, political, visual, critical, etc.—not minimize the traumatic effects—both psychical and physical—of the anatomical violence that marked, ruptured and destroyed enslaved persons in the systemic effort to negate black people’s human and cultural worth.

¹⁸⁰Keizer also notes the “call and response” structure of the ceremonies in the Clearing and—adhering to her focus on the “improvisational” tropes and metaphors in Morrison’s novel—identifies Baby Suggs’ sermon as a “New World ritual, a proto-jazz Black English blues spiritual” that is essential for the community’s integration, p. 37.

her. She was allowed to keep only her last child, Halle, whose own labor of love—renting himself out to work on other plantations on his rest days at Sweet Home—purchased her freedom. By re-enabling her hip with personal and cultural expressivity through dance¹⁸¹; by using her once “broken” tongue to articulate a radical philosophy of self and interpersonal black love¹⁸²; and by facilitating the collective production of music

¹⁸¹ Although I will not comprehensively address the significance of dancing in *Beloved*, I do wish to draw our attention to it. As she does with the metaphoric centrality of music and song, Morrison ascribes specifically black—African and Black Atlantic—cultural meanings to dance so that its inscriptions invoke practices of individual expressivity, collective healing and cultural retention. To the other Sweet Home men’s incomprehension, Sixo dances alone “among the trees at night” in order to “keep his bloodlines open,” reclaiming his cultural connections to his recent African past and the possibility of future generations (25). The only thing Sethe remembers is “song and dance” from the plantation on which she lived and worked before Sweet Home, in particular the antelope dance during which the men and women would transform themselves from exhausted field workers into “some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did” thereby (re)creating a cultural practice that revived their own sense of their humanity (31). But dancing has equally troubling figurations in the novel. A section which begins with Beloved doing a “two-step, two-step, make-a-new-step, slide, slide and strut on down” dance alone and that evolves into one in which she and Denver dance together “round and round,” forging a sisterly connection, abruptly dissolves into a figurative “dance” of incomprehension as the girls talk past each other when Denver misinterprets Beloved’s articulated memories of a slave ship as descriptions of the grave (74-75). Morrison depicts another metaphoric dance of “dizzying” (74) misunderstanding when Sethe attempts to explain the infanticide to Paul D: “It made him dizzy. At first he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction, which might have helped his head” (161). It would seem that when corporeally expressed, dancing has restorative powers for the black body, perhaps signaling a way in which Morrison slyly signifies on the dismissive stereotype of black dancing as a useless—if innate and admirably coordinated—expression of levity. Disconnected from the body, made figurative, dancing becomes associated with evasion and misunderstanding. This is a subject that demands further exploration elsewhere.

¹⁸² The inscription of broken tongues in *Beloved* illustrates the novel’s inquiry into the often inextricable connectedness between slavery’s metaphoric and material modes of domination, specifically, in this instance, the silencing of the enslaved. The slaves’ knowledge that the whites can always make themselves the only legitimate speaking subjects in any exchange convinces someone like Baby Suggs to “talk[...] as little as she could get away with because what was there to say that the roots of her tongue could

in the Clearing, Baby Suggs offers models of ways in which traumatized black subjects can initiate a process of cultural subversion as well as personal and collective healing—which is why the Clearing’s reemergence at the novel’s end so effectively affirms our sense of the community’s reconstruction.

There is every indication in *Beloved* that the necessarily *repetitive* ceremonies in the Clearing and the more enclosed conviviality of Baby Suggs’ home at 124 Bluestone Road had begun to effect a powerful process of re-membering individual and communal identities despite the people’s brutal experiences during their enslavement and their subjection to postbellum terrorism. Sethe remembers that although she had arrived at her mother-in-law’s home so physically brutalized that “nothing of [her] was intact” (34) and with the growing realization that “every mention of her past life hurt” (58), her “twenty-eight days of unslaved life” before the infanticide had brought

days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. That’s how she got through the waiting for Halle. Bit by bit, at 124 and the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another (95).

manage,” and answer to “anything” instead of her own treasured name because no white person had deemed it necessary to know her real name (141-142). Other slaves like Sethe’s mother and Paul D are reduced into tortured silence by the iron bit after they insist on their recognition as human subjects by attempting to escape their enslavement and, therefore, their status as objects—their legal and social classifications as “chattel personal.”

Morrison emphasizes that the people's togetherness creates a protective space that enables the transmission of various forms of productive knowledge as well as personal stories of both pain and joy that, in their aggregate, constitute the foundation of a community whose individual members' recognition of their connectedness to the others engenders an unprecedented sense of self-empowerment and self-possession. Through shared reminiscences, personal revelations and beneficial instruction, the people had begun to integrate a past—traumas and all—that would enable their present survival and an imagination of a shared future. In this passage, Sethe fully acknowledges that her emergent post-slavery identity is predicated on her caring relationship with the others and theirs with her. Her reflection stresses that the viability of both individual and communal subjectivities depends on this reciprocity.

Beloved's portrayal of Bluestone as a regenerative community in the above citation guides our recognition of the insistent link Morrison makes between communal- and self-degeneration and the traumatizing act of Sethe's infanticide. In other words, although Sethe, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid and all the others had suffered from slavery's "intolerable" machinery of material and symbolic violence (4)—constitutive of maternal dispossessions, whippings, burnings, forced milkings, breeding, studding, body-breaking labor, misnamings, rapes and proto-phrenological categorizations—they had begun to construct an interdependent community—with 124 as its center—that, as Sethe confirms, "made it better." After Sethe kills her daughter, however, "124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away" (86) and "for twelve years, long before

Grandma Baby died—[and before Paul D. arrived]—there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends. No coloredpeople” (12). Inscribed as an act of both intrafamilial and intracommunal violence, as opposed to the external violence committed against the black people by Schoolteacher and his ilk, the infanticide constitutes the kind of intimate trauma that produces the sort of “shattering” that *It’s Mornin’* gestures toward and that *Beloved* extensively develops. Everyone in the community is traumatized—though to varying degrees—because Sethe’s violence does not only come close to but takes place within “the village,” at *home*, another important figuration in Morrison’s continuing exploration of “tribal” concerns, as the title of her latest novel testifies.¹⁸³

Once again, it is also important to recognize here that Morrison’s attention to intracommunal violence underscores *Beloved*’s figurative commentary on the “black-on-black” violence of the 1980s and the extraordinary damage this internecine aggression has caused throughout African American communities. Recently expounding on the meaning of home, Morrison explains, “it’s where you feel safe. Where you’re among people who are kind to you—they’re not after you. They don’t have to like you—but they’ll not hurt you. And if you’re in trouble they’ll help you....It’s community—that’s another word for what I’ve described.”¹⁸⁴ It seems, then, that Morrison has been reflecting, for some time, on the ways in which late twentieth-century violence among black people has removed the “safety net” of care that, historically, had served to counter and heal the wounds of white violence. Distrust, fear, isolation and legions of broken and

¹⁸³ Toni Morrison, *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

¹⁸⁴ Toni Morrison on Love, Loss and Modernity,” *The Telegraph*, July 17, 2012.

dead black bodies have shattered many contemporary African American communities, creating a nadir of despair that perhaps rivals that of the late 1870s.

Although Ella retorts that “‘I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children’” when Stamp Paid reminds her of her erstwhile friendship with Sethe (187), Ella herself had ensured the death of a child to whom she had given birth by refusing to nurse the “hairy white thing,” fathered by “the lowest yet,” the father-son rapists (258-259). Sethe’s mother, too, committed multiple infanticides, killing all of her children who were the results of rape. Nan

told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. ‘She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe’ (62).

Nan asserts that the institutionalized sexual assault and coerced pregnancy of enslaved black women began with their captivity and journey through the Middle Passage, encompassing all points and stops in between, as the unspecified “island” suggests.¹⁸⁵ Nan, who functioned as Sethe’s maternal substitute when her own mother worked in the fields all day, urgently wishes Sethe to know that, despite her mother’s enforced

¹⁸⁵Possibly an island off the mainland African Coast used for “holding” captive Africans until the slave ships would embark with a full “cargo.” But also, possibly, an island in the Caribbean before eventual shipment to the United States’ mainland which would accord with *Beloved*’s memorial tribute to the “60 million and more” who were forced to make the traumatic journey to Atlantic, not only U.S., enslavement.

absences, she was the wanted and welcomed child of her parents' sexual desire and intimacy in very much the same way their four children are for the grown Sethe and Halle, not the result of coerced breeding and studding.¹⁸⁶ *Beloved* does not represent any of these infanticides as destructive or traumatizing acts for the mothers or their

¹⁸⁶Although my discussion focuses on maternity within the community, I wish to emphasize my awareness of Morrison's unsurprising and significant inscription of the black paternal in *Beloved*. Unsurprising, again, because of her examination into the comprehensive constituents of the novel's African American collective. Actual and figurative fathers and the legacies they produce are woven into the narrative along with those of mothers. Although readers do not know, for example, Sethe's mother's name, we do know something of her father's—presumably Seth or a variation—and that her mother wished their daughter to carry forward an important mark of her parents' relationship. Halle is not the son of Baby Suggs' beloved husband but she bestows that man's name on him instead of his "bill of sale" name in order to honor their loving relationship and to ascribe human subjectivity to her son (142). His "bill of sale" name, after all, reinforces his "thingness"—his position as an economic unit. One could say that as much as Halle's tenderness might be seen as an inherited trait due to his mother's big heart, it can also be interpreted as the legacy of this figurative father whose affection for his wife is embodied in his naming of her: "Baby." Interestingly, mothers perform the namings, illustrating, I believe, Morrison's insistence on relatively empowered women in her "womanist" texts—to invoke Alice Walker's culturally specific designation of black feminism—but also her signification on slavery's erasure of black fathers' socially nominative powers or what Hortense Spillers identifies as the removal of the "African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" ("Mama's Baby, p. 80). In a patrifocal, patrilineally dominant slave-owning society in which black fathers legally have been dispossessed of any rights or inclinations they may have to bestow their own names upon their progeny, the mothers restore the fathers' names not from any reactionary acceptance of gender subordination but as a sign of affectional bonds. Finally, there is Sixo whose name and African birth individually registers the legacy of the "60 million and more" and whose hopeful naming of his unborn child "Seven-O" at the moment of his burning death projects that legacy into future, multiple generations (226). The father's legacy also continues in the survivalist storytelling that motivates Denver, who hesitates to leave the confines of 124 despite her determination to save her mother. Baby Suggs' disembodied voice, "clear as anything," propels her outward with the queries, "'You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy'" (244)? Later still, after Denver has found a job and taken full responsibility for herself and Sethe, Paul D observes that "thinner, steady in the eyes, she looked more like Halle than ever" (266). Just as her father had sacrificed to secure his mother's freedom, Denver protects and cares for her mother in their own trying circumstances.

communities. White male rape of the black women instead constitute the violations that the women resist in the only way that they can and in the way that their communities affirm—the refusal to establish a maternal relationship with those children. Ella’s categorization of the child—as opposed to “her” child—as a “thing” and Sethe’s mother’s refusal to name the others—and thus confer the beginning of an individual and relational identity—underscore those children’s exclusion from both maternal and communal recognition. Since those children have not been integrated into either the woman’s perception of herself as their mother or the community’s definition of itself, their rejections and deaths do not produce any traumatizing effects because there is no sense of “unbearable loss” or irreparable damage (76). Sethe’s killing of her older daughter,¹⁸⁷ on the other hand, destroys the emergent post-slavery self she had begun to claim because

¹⁸⁷Given my discussion of the naming of the children here, it is important to address the significance of the dead daughter’s name—or lack thereof. Most often referred to by Sethe as the “crawling-already” baby, she assumes the name “Beloved” when she returns as, among other identities, the composite spirit of the baby girl, “the black and angry dead” (198) and the “60 million and more.” Only once does someone, Denver, refer to “her given name” (208) but that moniker is never revealed. This nominative gap is quite striking given the symbolic importance of Denver’s naming after Amy Denver, the “barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair” and “fugitive eyes” (84-5) who essentially functioned as Sethe’s midwife during her escape. One notes, too, the deliberate inscription of the names of all of Baby Suggs’ children despite their “scattering” (143). The names of Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Buglar, are registered also although they have abandoned 124 and its female inhabitants long before the novel’s narrative present. The children’s “given” names, then, function as figurative remembrances or “rememories” of significant absences. They also confer relative stability to their identities. Denver’s name will always recall the “charmed” circumstances of her birth and so on (209). The absence of a “given name” for the dead daughter, however, does not mirror that of the maternally and communally disavowed children. On one level, she was excessively recognized in so far as the absence of a name symbolizes Sethe’s overidentification with her—her inability to see her first daughter as a being separate from herself. On another level, the absent name allows for the instability of identity that enables “Beloved’s” return as a composite figure of familial and communal loss and yearning.

both problematically and understandably she believes she could not “draw breath without her children” (203). She asserts also that “after the shed, I stopped” (201), her acknowledgement of the psychic vacuum and emotional numbness that followed her violent resistance.

The killing debilitates the community also because its sense of its identity, its will for psychic and physical self-preservation as a group, depends on nurturing acts of protection for its recognized members. As Stamp Paid pleads to Baby Suggs, “‘Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood’” when confronted with racial violence (179)? Stamp Paid’s plea stresses the competing maternal and communal prerogatives in which Sethe understands the infanticide only as her determined act of protection for which she owes no explanation because “what she had done was right because it came from true love” (251) whereas the community abhors her “arrogant claim” (249) of possessive love and “misdirected” self-sufficiency (256). *Beloved* examines the claims of both entities by emphasizing the legitimacy of the community’s perception of the child as not only Sethe’s but as one of its members—even as it simultaneously reconstructs Sethe’s history and, therefore, the context of her conception of “safety,” autonomy and maternal protection.

When the pregnant Sethe reluctantly sends her three children ahead with the “agents” on the Underground Railroad, she temporarily suspends an attachment that she had strived to create on the ironically named Sweet Home farm despite the incessant demands for her time and labor. In the spatiotemporal interval between the children’s departure and Sethe’s arrival at Baby Suggs’, an extended community of many people—

including the “women in the wagon...who put sugar water in cloth to suck from” (16)—cares for the children in Sethe’s absence. Although Sethe perceives the sugar water and the women as inadequate substitutes for her milk and herself until their reunion when “the milk would be there and I would be there with it” (Ibid), *Beloved* suggests that, within the African American context, the concept of “substitution” can be reconfigured so that its connotations of lack and deficiency are revised to signify capacity and sufficiency. The women’s care of the baby girl—literalized in the feeding of the sugar water—enables the child’s survival during the escape until Stamp Paid continues that chain of care by “ferrying” her and her brothers across the Ohio River. Later, Sethe acknowledges that although she had believed that her milk was all the nourishment the baby needed, the child had shown remarkable development by the time of her mother’s arrival because “Baby Suggs fed her right” (160). Morrison’s narrative emphasizes that, under oppressive conditions in which “men and women were moved around like checkers” (23), improvised and extended black communities ensured essential sustenance and survival. Scholars, too, have established that “slaves adapted to the frequent disruptions of their families by developing extended kinship networks, communal care of and responsibility for children, and great respect for elders.”¹⁸⁸ The benefactors and beneficiaries—whose respective status was often interchangeable—within this network of nurture understandably formed attachments that made them each other’s “own,” hence the community’s claim to both Sethe *and* her daughter and its experience of Sethe’s killing of that daughter as an internal traumatizing event.

¹⁸⁸Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame. *Long Memory: The Black Experience in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 73.

Even as it represents the community's understanding of its legitimate claims in relation to its members, *Beloved*, like Baby Suggs, refuses to "approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice" (180). Instead, the narrative explores Sethe's conception of her maternal identity and prerogatives within contexts of maternal separation, maternal loss and formative isolation, constructing each as sustained enactments of traumatizing violations within slavery's greater system of racial subjugation. Through such figurations, *Beloved* returns to the central thematics established by Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Wilson's *Our Nig* in order to interrogate black women's perceptions of themselves as maternal subjects. But whereas those texts necessarily attended to dominant nineteenth-century formulations of idealized womanhood, sentimental motherhood and racial identity to construct their appeals for the recognition of a valued black maternal subjectivity, Morrison's novel suggests that she need not consider any such circumscriptions. Instead, her late twentieth-century imagination of an enslaved black maternal subject bears the imprint of generations of African American texts, critiques of American individualism, evolutions of feminist and womanist movements, along with nineteenth- and twentieth-century black liberation activism—including the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and, later, the Black Power Movement—that have enabled revisions of nineteenth-century black identity—maternal and otherwise. One recognizes, for instance, that Morrison's depiction of enslaved African characters like Nan, Sixo, and Paul D's and Sethe's mothers as well as the Middle Passage—which are largely absent from nineteenth-century American slave narratives—have been informed by twentieth-century Pan-African and anti-colonialist movements as well as the

establishment of Black Studies academic programs which have sought to revise and centralize African and African American historiography.

Feminism's emphasis, too, on women's autonomy and its insistence on the reclamation of women's history while articulating experiences that have otherwise gone largely unrepresented inform *Beloved*.¹⁸⁹ Black womanist projects such as the 1970s critical writings of Angela Davis, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Michele Wallace, Barbara Smith and Gloria Hull, among many others, together with the establishment of academic black women studies and feminism, have been especially insistent on examining black women's lives and legacies. Furthermore, decades-long iterations of black cultural and political formations that have stressed the desirability and efficacy of collective empowerment structure Morrison's reconsideration of a nineteenth-century maternal figure like Jacobs' Linda Brent whose heroic characterization primarily is individualized or located within the exceptionalism of her biological family.

Beloved reveals that what the Bluestone community perceives as Sethe's "complicated" independence and "outrageous" assertion of maternal autonomy emerged from her resolve to disrupt a legacy of maternal dispossession as well as her determination to protect her children from the incessant denigration that could "dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up" (251). Here, too, *Beloved* engages contemporary

¹⁸⁹Jean Wyatt observes that, along with the Middle Passage and the "desires of a preverbal infant," *Beloved* represents "childbirth and nursing from a mother's perspective," three "experiences that Western narratives usually leave out." "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *PMLA*, Vol. 108, No. 3 (May 1993), p. 474.

characterizations—both hegemonic and oppositional—of black motherhood. The multiple representations of Sethe’s independence and self-sufficiency echo so much of the post-1965 vilification of black mothers as matriarchs who had created a “tangle of pathology” within black families and black communities by asserting their supposedly anomalous authority in a “society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs.”¹⁹⁰ Daniel Moynihan’s rehearsal and elaboration of E. Franklin Frazier’s earlier call¹⁹¹ for the establishment/restoration of a patriarchally structured black family found support among many in the black community who joined the conservative denunciation of the “matriarchal structure’s” “crushing burden on the Negro male.” Despite more progressive contestations of the “myth of the Superwoman,”¹⁹² the scapegoating of black mothers continued for decades into the 1980s when further accusations of “ineffective mothering” of sons were leveled against them. The novel’s announcement that Sethe and her children “were a family somehow and [Paul D] was not the head of it” (132) represents the most succinctly explicit inscription of *Beloved*’s engagement with this twentieth-century matriarchal discourse but the narrative’s comprehensive examination of the genesis of Sethe’s independence and others’ assessment of that characteristic reflects Morrison’s dual contextualization of her black maternal figure.

Beloved indicates that before Bluestone, Sethe’s lack of a community—especially that of women—exacerbates the debilitating effects of maternal deprivation and loss,

¹⁹⁰Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor. <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-moynihan.htm>

¹⁹¹*The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1939.

¹⁹²Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: The Dial Press), 1979.

creating a profound isolation that ensures both her inability and refusal to distinguish herself from her children. Indeed, this refusal becomes fully realized in multiple expressions of codependency after Beloved's "return" because Sethe's maternal qualities attract the ghost and the ghost's neediness attracts Sethe. Sethe's connection to her children bears the weight of her own childhood yearnings for her mother, that mother's (imagined)¹⁹³ longing for Sethe as well as the affectional bonds that the adult Sethe has forged during pregnancy and child-rearing. Sethe's desire for filial inseparability makes it impossible for her to imagine her children's ability to survive what she herself had concluded was an "unlivable life" when enslaved. Sethe's separation from and loss of her mother fuel her own overwhelming desire to nourish and nurture her children and nursing milk functions as the primary symbol of both literal maternal presence/absence and figurative maternal connection/disconnection. Although she has very little memory of her "Ma'am"¹⁹⁴ because she saw her only a "few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo" (60), Sethe suffers acutely from this maternal ignorance and

¹⁹³ Although Nan assures Sethe that she was the only child her mother wanted, her uncertainty about her mother's devotion to her intensifies her sense of maternal loss. Sethe's interiorized ruminations in the second part of the novel reveal that, in the many years since her mother's hanging, she had always feared that her mother's desire for her own freedom superseded her love for her daughter: "I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she" (203)? Sethe's experience of her mother's attempted escape and death as abandonment competes with her hope that her yearning for her mother was reciprocated. Having shared only a few remembered moments with her mother, however, Sethe remains painfully uncertain.

¹⁹⁴ The novel's vernacular moniker for the black characters' maternal title, "Ma'am" becomes another signifier in Morrison's revision of black maternity with its apostrophic and lexical disruption and abbreviation of "mammy." "Ma'am" reminds readers of dominant white distortions and appropriations of black maternal qualities for white people's own self-justifying negations of black women's commitment to their own families as it simultaneously avers the respect accorded black mothers within their families and communities.

absence because she understands that her abbreviated nursing for only “two or three weeks” (Ibid) meant not only the loss of nutritional sustenance and physical and emotional connectedness but also cultural disinheritance. She remembers that her mother “never fixed my hair or nothing,” a significant ritual of mother-daughter bonding in black communities. Indeed Sethe’s memory of this particular loss is prompted by Beloved’s query about whether her “woman” fixed her hair as Sethe braids Denver’s hair. Later, when Sethe recognizes Beloved as the embodied ghost of her baby¹⁹⁵, one of the ways in which she offers obsessive maternal compensation is hair grooming: “she played with Beloved’s hair, braiding, puffing, tying, oiling it until it made Denver nervous to watch her” (240).

Sethe’s mother’s separation and eventual death also means the loss of a mother tongue, the African language(s) that Nan and her mother spoke and that she once understood but that “would never come back” (62). Having lost this significant means of cultural transmission, Sethe cannot pass it on to her own children—one of the novel’s powerful figurations of the kind of intergenerational dispossession and cultural rupture that slavery enacted.¹⁹⁶ Yet once again, Morrison interweaves the literal with the symbolic by portraying Sethe’s mother’s death as a traumatizing event that has both

¹⁹⁵ Although *Beloved* inscribes an open-ended identity for the ghost, suggesting that its ostensible embodiment of Sethe’s dead daughter is only one possibility, I deliberately use this construction here to emphasize Sethe’s perspective of the encounter and relationship.

¹⁹⁶ The cultural rupture that lost African languages signify in *Beloved* does not unfold along vertical, familial lines only but also along horizontal, communal ones. When Paul D recalls Sixo’s defiant singing during his lynching, he wonders if he should not have joined him in order to show solidarity but also in order to ensure his own killing so that he could escape the horror of continued enslavement. Paul D did not join Sixo’s song, however, because “the words put him off—he didn’t understand the words” (227).

corporeal and psychic consequences. Sethe loses discursive power after she sees her mother's corpse, begins to "stutter" and does not regain verbal fluency until she forges a profound emotional bond with Halle (201), the enslaved son who has a powerful, ongoing connection to his mother.

Sethe also recognizes the establishment of racial hierarchy from birth in the apportionment of nursing milk because not only is her mother forced to wean her prematurely but Nan, in her role of wet nurse, had to feed the white babies first, leaving Sethe only with "what was left" which was "no nursing milk to call [her] own" (200). Here, the tripartite figuration of Sethe, her mother and Nan deftly captures the slaveholders' simultaneous exploitation of black women's productive and reproductive capacities. Having been disabled by some form of physical labor (like Baby Suggs) or by a form of violent punishment, one-armed Nan is forced into another kind of work, nursing both future slaveholders and slave children and, consequently, like biological slave mothers, has become "property that reproduced itself without cost" (228). From an early age, Sethe learns that, disfigured or not, she is destined for labor and that within this society she will, at best, be given the leftovers "or none" (200). Her experiences as a daughter who always suffered from want engender her determination to "tend [her children] as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter" (Ibid) and convince her that the resultant emotional emptiness meant that "milk was all [she] ever had" to give as a physical sign of that desire to nurture (159). *Beloved*, then, extensively constructs the traumatic contexts of maternal loss and separation that enable readers to understand the origins of Sethe's own maternal anxieties and desires thus ensuring our empathic refusal

to condemn her. It clarifies, in other words, the deeply damaging experiences that inform Sethe's maternal subjectivity—her hopeful conviction that an abundance of mother's milk would not only ensure her emotional bonds with her own children but would also fill the enduring emptiness left by her own maternal loss.

The novel also demands, however, our recognition that one of the tragic effects of such excessive deprivation is Sethe's inability to identify alternative sources of nurture, including maternal surrogates. As a child experiencing the immensity of her mother's absence, Sethe understandably resents the presence of "the woman called Nan," a resentment that leaves her "unimpressed" with Nan's attempts to impart the familial and cultural lessons that Sethe's own mother's separation impedes her from doing (62). "Small girl Sethe" does not comprehend the crucial surrogate role Nan has assumed and—by the novel's implication—upon which Sethe's mother had come to rely, if not arrange. As she remembers Nan's attempts at instruction and protection, the "grown-up woman Sethe ... was angry, but not certain at what" (62). *Beloved* declines to specify the object of Sethe's anger, instead intimating the mature woman's emerging but still subconscious realization of Nan's crucial function with the revelation that "a mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like surf" (Ibid). Baby Suggs, of course, *is* the maternal surrogate that Sethe embraces as an adult, initially, perhaps, because she is her mother-in-law and, later, because Baby Suggs' expansive love envelops her like a daughter, refusing the relative distance that "in-law" suggests.

Before the adult relationship with Baby Suggs, however, the formative maternal deprivation of Sethe's girlhood is compounded by her isolation on Sweet Home where

she would only see another black woman, Aunt Phyllis, when she gave birth. We realize the noteworthiness of this section's characterization of the formation of Sethe's maternal subjectivity because Morrison enables Sethe to articulate it directly in her own voice as part of her explanation of the infanticide to Paul D. Such a construct indicates Sethe's developing awareness of the connection between her debilitating experiences and her maternal emotions and expressions. The section also reveals slavery's conflation of the black woman's biological maternal self with every other part of identity¹⁹⁷, unnervingly suggesting that, sometimes, she too, begins to internalize that conflation.¹⁹⁸ Aunt Phyllis attended as Sethe's midwife for each of her first three children because Garner would bring her from a neighboring plantation in order to ensure the safety of the mother and babies, thereby protecting his property. Neither he nor his wife ever considered Sethe's need or desire for black female companionship outside of childbirth but Sethe recalls this yearning: "Many's the time I wanted to get over to where she was. Just to talk" (160).

As Sethe continues her recollection, however, she conveys less about her personal

¹⁹⁷When Sethe and Halle decide to marry, for instance, she naively expects the Garners to mark their union with a celebratory ceremony. Mrs. Garner's immediate response reveals that for slaveholders, however, the significance of a black couple's union lies in the potential increase of capital: "Halle and me want to be married, Mrs. Garner." "So I heard." She smiled. "He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?" (26). When Sethe presses further to determine if there would be "a wedding," Mrs. Garner's amused rejection of Sethe's desire emphasizes that the Garners' "special kind of slavery" (140) still affirmed the hegemonic ideology that refuted similarities between black and white people. Marriage, then, and its culturally dominant role in structuring heterosexual relations, family, and inheritance emerge as a highly contested terrain upon which the very humanity of black people could be defined. Marriage in the United States has been as much about race as it has been about gender, as countless miscegenation laws reinforced.

¹⁹⁸*Beloved* suggests also that black men, too, can acquiesce to such definitions when they support their investment in reifying masculinist imperatives. When *Beloved*'s seduction undermines Paul D's sense of his own masculine power, he decides that his impregnation of Sethe could be the "solution" that would "document his manhood" (128).

loneliness and more about her maternal isolation, tellingly creating a link between Sweet Home and the plantation on which she was enslaved with her mother and Nan.

‘I wish I’d known more, but, like I say, there wasn’t nobody to talk to. Woman, I mean. So I tried to collect what I’d seen back where I was before Sweet Home. How the women did there. Oh they knew all about it. How to make that thing you use to hang the babies in the trees—so you could see them out of harm’s way while you worked in the fields.... It’s hard, you know what I mean? By yourself and no woman to help you get through’ (160).

Sethe invokes slavery’s two permissible roles for black women here—laborer and breeder¹⁹⁹—but her reflection also underscores the black women’s (re)definition of those roles in order to create their own sense of their maternal identities through their careful protection of the babies, thereby challenging the enslavers’ conviction that “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190). The women could derive some satisfaction from their efforts at mothering—as opposed to “breeding”—but the conditions of their enslavement have left little, if any, space for self-definition beyond the established roles. As complex and

¹⁹⁹Summarizing the dual working roles of enslaved women, Jacqueline Jones writes, “as blacks, slave women were exploited for their skills and physical strength in the production of staple crops; as women, they performed a reproductive function vital to individual slaveholders’ financial interests and to the inherently expansive system of slavery in general.” *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p. 12. While my project’s focus on motherhood necessarily concentrates on the characters’ reproductive roles, my multiple readings of *Beloved* always bring into focus Morrison’s insistent inscriptions of enslaved black women as exploited workers as well, reminding readers of this multi-generational theft that created so much of the New (and Old European) World’s wealth. Baby Suggs, for example, marvels that she would be paid “money every single day” if she worked in the slaughterhouse in Cincinnati whereas she earned nothing during the decades when the “field work...broke her hip and the exhaustion drugged her mind” (140).

painful as her experiences as a child has been, Sethe, consequently, cannot articulate any sense of an adult self apart from motherhood.

Sethe's maternal deprivation and formative isolation engender a forceful maternal agency that enables her and her children's escape from Sweet Home which none of the male slaves succeed in doing before being sold, captured, driven insane or murdered. She takes great pride in that singular achievement:

'I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own....I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on* and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before' (162).

One cannot easily question Sethe's assertion of maternal independence or, indeed, her emphatic recognition of selfhood which she expresses in her reiteration of "I" and "me," given the ways in which the mechanisms of slavery were deployed in order to negate both. Her articulation reveals her impressive psychological and material resistance against her attempted dehumanization. Yet while her acknowledgement of her "selfishness" seems innocuously comprehensible on a primary level of interpretation, claimed as the consequence of unprecedented active love, a more probing inquiry suggests that the word's deployment—within the larger context of the novel—reveals more injurious implications. That is, the conditions of her life-long enslavement which produce Sethe's maternal selfishness make it impossible for her to imagine a survivable life for her children

in which she and no other can protect and love them enough or in which anyone but herself could make well-meaning claims on them.²⁰⁰

A heated argument between Sethe and Paul D over Denver's jealousy of the latter's presence in their home reveals Sethe's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of such claims. She apologizes for Denver's rudeness but Paul D counters that, as a grown woman, Denver must make amends for own infractions. Sethe, in turn, rejects this expectation.

‘I don’t care what she is. Grown don’t mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What’s that supposed to mean? In my heart it don’t mean a thing.’

‘It means she has to take it if she acts up. You can’t protect her every minute. What’s going to happen when you die?’

‘Nothing! I’ll protect her while I’m alive and I’ll protect her when I ain’t’ (45).

Paul D retreats from the argument as he recognizes the futility of countering Sethe's illogical declaration but not before adding that he wishes for “space” to love Sethe and care for Denver in reciprocal relationships. Paul D offers a particularly appropriate dimensional metaphor because, when juxtaposed next to Sethe's refusal to acknowledge

²⁰⁰ Although here I emphasize the potentially injurious consequences of Sethe's “selfishness,” I believe it is important to acknowledge another equally compelling interpretation of Sethe's comment. Sethe seems to recognize that slavery's denial of black people's humanity makes it necessary for the former slaves to create a space—albeit a possibly transitional one—with their “selves” at the center in order to attain new forms of subjectivity. Selfishness in this instance, then, is an essential step for freeing oneself.

Denver's separateness and maturity, it captures the "danger" and "risk" of enslaved maternal love (45). Sethe's traumatic confinement within slavery has not allowed her the perspective and emotional capacity to accommodate her children's—young or grown—necessary distinction from herself nor their potentially strengthening connection to others within the community. Paul D's conclusion that "Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" might be specifically reformulated so that "Sethe" substitutes for "world" and "her children" takes the place of "she" (164).

Sethe's assumption of maternal inseparability takes its most extreme expression, of course, in the attempted killing and killing of her children when she "collected...all the *parts of her* that were precious and fine and beautiful" in order to escape re-enslavement through their collective deaths (163; my emphasis).²⁰¹ The scene of the infanticide strikingly connects Sethe's desire for maternal inseparability not only to her own present relationship to her children but to her past separation from her own mother as well. Morrison accomplishes this dual connection by inscribing a hat as a symbol of Sethe's vulnerability, an image that, within the framework of post-trauma studies, functions as a "trigger" that destroys Sethe's defenses and unleashes multiple and overlapping memories of pain and anger that ends in an eruption of violence. When Stamp Paid recalls Sethe's murderous response to Schoolteacher's arrival, he laments that "while he and Baby Suggs were looking the wrong way, a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (158). Sethe herself agrees with

²⁰¹In contrast, Stamp Paid's perspective insists upon differentiation: "Stamp Paid did not tell him how she flew, snatching up *her children* like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected *them* every which way...." (157).

Stamp Paid's memory, recalling that "she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings" and attempted to "drag" her children "through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (163). Sethe's association of Schoolteacher's hat with his brutalization of her and the other slaves seems a sufficiently straightforward explanation for her reaction until one remembers that the slaveholder's hat is not the only one to which *Beloved* ascribes figurative significance for Sethe.

Sethe asserts that her separation from her mother began so early and was so routine that she could not distinguish her from the other women on the plantation until an "eight-year-old who watched over the young ones" pointed out the woman who wore a "cloth hat as opposed to a straw one," the singular mark of her maternal identity for her daughter (30). Later still, when she recounts her mother's thwarted escape and subsequent hanging, she insists that she "looked everywhere for that hat," unable to acknowledge her mother's death and her own grief at such loss (201). Even in the closing pages of the novel as Sethe and Paul D tentatively move towards a reunion, Sethe yearns to tell Paul D that "her ma'am had hurt her feelings and she couldn't find her hat anywhere" (272). Although she does not verbalize this yearning, she says finally, "She left me....She was my best thing" (Ibid). Given *Beloved*'s recent disappearance and Sethe's subsequent collapse, Paul D and many readers may conclude that Sethe speaks of *Beloved*. They would be correct. But, I would argue, Sethe also speaks of her mother here. Sethe's mother's hat, with which she associates profound maternal dispossession, has as much to do with her violent response as Schoolteacher's. In other words, her

sighting of the hat provokes overlapping memories of separation, loss, and brutality—all traumatizing events—that seals the conflation of her past and her present, her enforced isolations from her mother as a child and her own experienced and threatened maternal violations as an adult. Not surprisingly, Sethe discloses in her internal monologue that when Schoolteacher arrived her “plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma’am is” (203), leaving no doubt about her determination to definitively resist slavery’s attempted destruction of her maternal lineage and, at once, revealing the profound desire for a lost maternal connection that lies at the center of her identities as a daughter and a mother.

Beloved’s representation of infanticide builds upon an examination of African American maternal trauma and resisting violence that Angelina Grimké inaugurated with her play *Rachel* almost one hundred years ago. Only intimated in *Rachel*’s closing scene, a mother’s murder of her child in her despairingly determined effort to protect that child finds explicitly complex expressions in Grimké’s “The Closing Door,” Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Safe*, Shirley Graham’s *It’s Mornin’* and, finally, *Beloved*. Each text before Morrison’s novel concludes with the child’s death or even with the mother’s own—as in the case of “The Closing Door’s” Agnes—unable to confront or articulate the complicated questions of familial, communal and racial survival that necessarily arise when one imagines the killing of the next generation as a weapon of resistance and assertion of self-determination against chronic oppression and brutality. In 1987, 124 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, America’s treatment of its black population was often still “spiteful” and “venomous” and Morrison seems to have recognized that

such questions could no longer be avoided. To appropriate the author's words, the "unspeakable had to be unspoken." So Sethe's maternity does not end with her daughter's decapitation. Baby Suggs forces her to "trade the living for the dead," ensuring that "Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (152). Indelibly marked by the trauma of racial brutality but also nourished by her mother's desire to nurture, the child who lives because Stamp Paid saved her "from the arch of [her] mother's swing" (149) emerges as the symbol of generational resilience and survival. When Denver was a baby and her mother had gone past the breaking point, a member of the community intervened and saved her. When her mother's collapse and powerlessness cement their isolation, the adult Denver's appeal to her community marshals resources that enable their livelihood. *Beloved* insists that African American healing and empowered survival cannot be ensured without collective resistance and communal care.

APPENDIX

Coda: “The Same Wounding...The Same Pain?”

I have taken the title of my coda from the final page of Ayana Mathis’ 2013 novel *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*.²⁰² Offering an admittedly limited examination of this text and several other recent narratives and selective cultural moments, I conclude this project with some reflections about the ways in which discursive constructions of race and racial violence have shifted so that figurations of the history of racial trauma and its post-traumatic significations for twenty-first century African Americans often have become elliptical, stilted, sometimes barely expressible. Nevertheless, ongoing contestations of racial hegemony as well as African American assertions of communal and personal autonomy signify that although the violations continue—and too often manifest as intracommunal wounding—acts of resistance attest to a collective will for survival and self-determination.

Like her nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors whose texts I have analyzed in order to understand some figurative expressions of African American trauma, Mathis creates a maternal narrative that explores the incapacitating consequences of black poverty and women’s disempowerment. Gesturing towards the larger socio-historical context in which the Shepherd family’s story unfolds, Mathis structures her novel with titles that identify annual dates, along with the names of Hattie’s children and one grandchild. The narrative covers the period from the Great Migration year of 1923 to 1980, the year of Ronald Reagan’s election as President, a

²⁰² New York: Vintage Books, p. 299.

notable political marker of a sustained reactionary surge against African American social advancement in the post-segregation era.

In her titular refiguration of the Old Testament endorsement of patriarchal descent, Mathis invokes at least a two centuries' long cultural manipulation of the black mother as the central figure of African American familial and communal lineage. Indeed, although *Twelve Tribes* simultaneously offers a sobering interrogation of black sexuality—including male homosexuality, homophobia, heterosexual relations and marriage—the primary paternal character, Hattie's husband August, remains a marginal figure throughout the text, ultimately not much more than a cipher. Mathis, too, grapples with the legacy of Moynihan's matriarch which has endured as an ascendant figuration of black mothers. Yet what strikes me most about Mathis' construction of the maternal subject is the degree to which the novel focuses less on Hattie's perspective and rarely on her consciousness. Instead, the children's stories and their viewpoints form the crux of this maternal narrative, thereby accentuating the concern with the transgenerational effects of particular forms of African American mothering—and what chilling ones they are.

Presenting the formative events of the children's lives, the third-person narrator characterizes an aloof mother who is, at turns, “brusque,” “rigid” (80-82), “stern and angry” (248) but “never tender” (271). Hattie's offspring do not understand the sources of her rage because, fiercely determined to keep “them all alive with sheer will and collard greens and some old southern remedies” (234), Hattie believes she has neither the time nor the energy to offer conventional forms of expressive love. Importantly,

too, she refuses to communicate anything about herself, past or present. The children, then, do not really know their mother or her history. Unlike Hattie's children, however, a reader, enabled by the third-person accounts of traumatizing pain and violence, begins to understand how Hattie has grown into the woman she has become.

The first wounding about which we learn is the 1923 murder of Hattie's father, a successful blacksmith killed by two white men who deemed his accomplishments threats to both their racial and economic dominance. Fearing for their own lives, Hattie, her mother, and her two sisters "snuck like thieves through the woods" (9) in order to join "all those souls" who escaped the South during the Great Migration in hopes of "beginning a new nation" in a North that would disappoint and suffocate too many of them (11). As they travel to the north, the young women and their mother suffer the humiliations of their segregated transportation, along with the racial-sexual torment of the conductor who "pressed his body into theirs as they climbed up into the car" (139). But Hattie's children do not seem to know this story of their maternal past. Not long after the omniscient narrator offers the account of Hattie's family's nocturnal flight, we learn that her oldest surviving son, Floyd, "didn't know what had happened to her in [Georgia] which she would only refer to as 'that place.'" Hattie and August were refugees from the South; Floyd's knowledge of it was comprised of their terror and nostalgia and rage" (39).

Although Hattie does not speak about her father's murder, the narrator asserts that if "she lived to be one hundred..." she would remember her "father's body collapsed in the corner of his smithy, the two white men from town walking away from

his shop without enough shame to quicken their pace or hide their guns. Hattie had seen that and she could not unsee it” (10-11). Does Hattie not speak to her children about this racial violence and dispossession because she does not recognize its familial and communal importance along with its personal significance? Does she not speak of it because she wishes to protect her offspring from such painful knowledge much as Mrs. Loving had done in *Rachel*? Or because her determination to create a new life in the North—exemplified by the “names of promise and of hope,” Philadelphia and Jubilee, she bestows on her firstborn but short-lived twins (3)—dictates silence, if not forgetting? What are the consequences—personal and transgenerational—of such self-silencing? Given the profoundly dysfunctional relationships among the Shepherds and those with whom they become intimate, the narrative suggests that rage—both suppressed and explosive—chronic emotional distress including, mental illness, self-hatred, confusion, fear, and political apathy constitute the debilitating symptoms and effects of trauma that has not been acknowledged nor voiced.

Yet Hattie’s silence about her painful past, including the early and possibly preventable deaths of her twins, seems to be not only a significant part of the narrative content. It is emblematic also of the novel’s own ambivalence about identifying the dominant socio-historical—specifically racial, gender, and socioeconomic—forces that have shaped and placed limits on the Shepherds’ choices. So while *Twelve Tribes* delineates the “whats,” it seems less confident about developing and representing the “whys.” And this uncertainty marks its significant divergence from the twentieth-century texts I have explored in the preceding chapters. While it may seem that the

recognition of the depiction of Hattie's father's murder and her mother's (and her own) sexual humiliation contradicts my argument, I would counter that even when *Twelve Tribes* inscribes such moments, it remains unsure about the weight of this legacy. Perhaps such narrative ambivalence should not come as a surprise. That is to say, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have given rise to potent discourses that have consistently questioned the continuing significance of race and the legacies of racism in the quality and outcome of African American lives. Indeed many have openly declared the emergence of a "post-racial" America.

I am not at all asserting that Mathis' text functions as a figurative enactment of such delusional conceptualizations of race matters in contemporary United States culture. I am hypothesizing, however, that *Twelve Tribes* struggles to explore and comprehend the meaning of the legacy of racial trauma amongst a discursive din of "personal responsibility" and Oprah Winfrey-type exceptionalism; the social reality of *de-jure* integration but *de-facto* segregation; the emergence of a significant black middle class amidst grinding black poverty; the increased numbers of elected black politicians and the election of an African American president whose public utterances on race too often remain strained, metaphoric and elliptical; the visibility of a first lady who has entitled herself "Mom-in-Chief" while "baby mama" has emerged out of the black community as the latest denigration of black motherhood, and so on. In this post-Civil Rights period, *Twelve Tribes* seems to wonder whether past southern horrors and "the vague but powerful entity" of northern white people (70)—in an era of many

African Americans' reverse migration to the South—can be identified as legitimate sources of Hattie's rage.

The novel registers, too, that black women's gendered position, especially as it relates to their sexuality and sexual independence, has shaped their maternal identity and experiences. Hattie's lack of access to reliable birth control undermines her sexual autonomy because her multiple pregnancies and childbirths—eleven children—comprise the unaffordable price she must pay for sexual pleasure. On this issue, Hattie sadly reminds readers of Nella Larsen's Helga Crane in the 1928 novel *Quicksand*. In the 1968 chapter, however, Hattie's most economically privileged daughter Alice convinces herself that it “was not an act of aggression” against her husband “when she opened the new packet of pills each month” which enables her to determine when and if she would bear children (184).

Despite *Twelve Tribe*'s framing of these socio-historical concerns, most of the characters themselves seem unaware of their significance. Is it possible that Mathis comments on African Americans' (in)attention to and comprehension of the ways in which a larger cultural context—institutions and ideologies—influence their lives? Hattie and others seem to believe that nothing else but her choice of husband has been her “ruin” (157, 220). Because Mathis does not extensively develop August's story as part of the larger narrative, readers might be inclined to agree that his family's distress should be attributed primarily to his extramarital affairs and financial carelessness.

The novel, however, offers glimpses into other possible explanations. We learn that, ostensibly, August had borrowed money in order to pay union dues, hoping that his membership would increase his earnings, “but it ain’t done nothing but buy whiskey for them white boys” (154). August’s accusation remarks on the institutional exclusion of black men from well-compensated industrial jobs in northern metropolises like Philadelphia, the city of the novel’s primary setting. We know also that, from August’s perspective, his inability to provide secure financial support for his family engenders his conceptualization of other forms of paternal care: “I go down that yard every day, and every day they say, “Nothin for you.” I come home singing—you damn right I come in and bounce them children on my knee and try to make them laugh—ain’t much else to give them” (154). While Hattie’s dismissal of such explanations as the self-serving excuses of a philandering husband and marginally employed father is not entirely unmerited, it also echoes contemporary debates within and outside African American communities about the obligations of black fatherhood and the fundamental causes of black male social estrangement and economic marginalization. In other words, is the statistically overwhelming undereducation and subemployment of black men the result of personal choices that reasonably can be disconnected from issues of ongoing racism and the structural transformations of labor markets? Are there healthy models of black fatherhood that might be characterized by emotional and physical nurturing as well as—or, sometimes, instead of—financial provision, thereby challenging conventional definitions of black masculinity?

The complex interplay of socioeconomic conditions and personal decisions that both sabotages Hattie's and August's marriage and undermines their parenting proves too daunting for the second generation out of Georgia. This degenerative marital discourse, of course, speaks to what has now become a decades-long debate about the health of black heterosexual relationships and marriages. The jury may still be out but presiding judges have declared them doomed. Failed marriages, promiscuity, hidden homosexuality, mental illness, separation, and deception characterize the children's lives away from their parents as well as within the parental household.

In its treatment of Sala, the representative grandchild, however, *Twelve Tribes* inscribes and reflects a critical (re)development in contemporary African American communities that *Beloved's* depiction of Denver's relationships with Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid and Miss Lady Jones prefigures. Similar to those elders' recuperative intervention into Denver's life when Sethe's life becomes untenable, Hattie and August choose to care for their granddaughter when her mother's debilitating mental illness precludes maternal nurture. Like countless grandmothers, aunts, uncles, grandfathers and others, Hattie and August recognize that they must serve as surrogates for Sala's "mother-want" (297) in order to prepare her to confront a "world...that would not be kind" (290). But whereas Hattie had attempted to train her own children with such unmitigated sternness that they nicknamed her "The General," she revises her approach with Sala:

She couldn't bear that the child was already so broken she was driven to the mercy seat. There was time for Sala. Hattie didn't know how to save her granddaughter. She felt

overwhelmed and unprepared as she had when she was a young mother at seventeen. Here we are sixty years out of Georgia, she thought, a new generation has been born, and there's still the same wounding and the same pain. I can't allow it. She shook her head. I can't allow it (299).

Because Hattie has remained mostly silent about her decades' long "wounding," little in the novel suffices to explain her transformation except an unsatisfactory nod to the universalism of time's passing and a supposed softening that comes with old age. Her response to Sala's suffering nevertheless reveals her recognition of the compounded injuries of her lifetime and her emergent resolve to create a different legacy for her granddaughter. Although uncertain about the ways in which she might help to empower the new generation, Hattie rejects palliative religiosity as the answer, determined to begin the healing with a "rough" love finally mixed with a new tenderness.

Although *Twelve Tribes* registers a vacillating contemporary reluctance to specify the trauma of African American violation, other recent discursive moments reveal that the historical wounding and pain continue to haunt our individual, communal, and national consciousness. In February 2012, the specter of the lynching of black men rose again when George Zimmerman's murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin drew relatively little national attention until Martin's parents, black activists, and black media outlets raised such an outcry that the circumstances of his death and the legal establishment's initially feather-gloved treatment of Zimmerman—which included declining to arrest—could no longer be ignored. Zimmerman, his

supporters, and the police apparently believed that Martin could be tracked and killed without repercussions because a young black man who wore a hoodie was a de facto criminal and could not possibly “belong” in a middle-class, gated enclave such as the one in which his father lived and in which he was killed. Nor, apparently, should such a young man resort to legitimate self-defense when confronted with adult aggression. While this representation of young black manhood clearly resonated with the all-but-one white women’s jury and with others, the African American collective memory of historical racial violence and segregation as well as the recognition of the ongoing social assumptions that devalue black life incited mass public expressions of anger, pain and resolve.

A day before Zimmerman was acquitted of Martin’s murder on July 13, 2013, Ryan Coogler’s film *Fruitvale Station* was released. The African American’s directorial debut re-imagines the final hours of Oscar Grant III’s life on New Year’s Eve 2008 before he was murdered in the early morning of January 1, 2009 by a white public-transit officer in Oakland, California. Despite multiple recordings of the events leading up to the unarmed Grant’s death, his killer served less than one year in prison. In a New York Times review of *Fruitvale Station*, a critic reflects, “the deaths of these [Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin] and other African-American young men...touch some of the rawest nerves in the body politic and raise thorny and apparently intractable issues of law and order, violence and race.”²⁰³ The tone of wary resignation that infuses A.O. Scott’s acknowledgement of the systemic violence against young,

²⁰³ A. O. Scott, “A New Year and a Last Day Alive: *Fruitvale Station* is based on the Story of Oscar Grant III.” *The NYTimes.Com*, July 12, 2013.

black men suggests that, notwithstanding significant eruptions of public protests and quieter forms of civil rights activism, there remains a larger societal presumption that the establishment of “law and order” is predicated on the violation of young, black men.

If the murder of Trayvon Martin, the acquittal of his killer, and *Fruitvale Station* evoked America’s lynching past and emphasized its racially violent present, Steve McQueen’s October 2013 dramatization of Solomon Northup’s 1853 memoir, *Twelve Years A Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, A Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped In Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, From A Cotton Plantation Near The Red River in Louisiana*, returned to slavery, the founding institution of African American violation and racial trauma. In its perhaps unprecedented visual representation of slaveholders’ brutalization of black people’s bodies—not to mention their emotional and psychological lives—and its reflective relationship to *Fruitvale Station*, *Twelve Years A Slave*²⁰⁴ demands recognition of the ways in which the kinds of racial wounding that began with enslavement continue—again and again.

One of the most chilling scenes in the film reveals McQueen’s interpretation of Northup’s text as not only a depiction of the antebellum period of 160 years ago but also as a prefiguration of the violence that this foundation would continue to engender

²⁰⁴My attention to these two films results from what I have determined is their relevance to my project’s interest in continuing representations of black violation and trauma. Yet I must also emphasize that while very few black male-directed movies are nationally distributed, even fewer films directed by black women are chosen for national release. Consequently, audiences’ exposure to black women’s cinematic discourses remain markedly limited.

in the years following legal manumission. In this scene, Platt (the first name forced onto Northup) is tied and hung from a tree, his feet futilely searching for the support of solid ground. The camera lingers—for what seems an eternity in contemporary cinematic terms—on his silent, twisting form, highlighting McQueen’s visual trope of the lynched, black male body which, in turn, evokes other visual media from decades ago: the well-circulated lynching postcards and newspaper photographs that announced and celebrated black people’s terrorization. McQueen’s visual economy also summons mental images of the capital executions of prisoners, a disproportionately large percentage of whom are African American men, thereby constructing a narrative of violence that encompasses the past and the present.

But, we ask: Are the targets of racial violence always male? Like Northup, McQueen does not believe so. The corollary episode to Platt’s hanging is Patsey’s flogging. In this excruciating scene, the young woman’s flesh is torn apart by the master’s whip for her presumed assertion of sexual autonomy, graphically refiguring an earlier, less viscerally violent scene of the slaveholder’s raping of Patsey. In its treatment of Patsey (and other enslaved women), *Twelve Years A Slave* directs our attention to the sexual *and* racial violence to which black women have been subjected but that is so often absent from contemporary public deliberations.

On November 2, 2013, three and a half months after Zimmerman had been acquitted of Trayvon Martin’s murder, a young woman from Detroit, Michigan, nineteen-year-old Renisha McBride, was shot and killed by Theodore Wafer, a white man to whose suburban house she apparently had gone to seek help after an

automobile accident. Later claiming that he felt threatened by McBride's appearance on his porch, Wafer shot her in her face through a locked screen door. Although McBride's family and some local activists led protests which, one imagines, were partially responsible for murder charges against Wafer two weeks after the killing, McBride's death—even in the wake of the national attention to Zimmerman's trial—drew relatively little public notice.²⁰⁵ At a local demonstration, one black woman protester denounced the routine minimalization of violence against black women.

‘I’m sick and tired of seeing black women murdered, raped, beaten, shot and nobody’s talking about it. I’m sick of the apathy. I’m sick of the apathy in the community. I’m sick of the apathy in the media. And it’s—enough is enough!’²⁰⁶

In a distressing repetition of the discursive elisions of the violence against African American women during lynching's era and in the disregard of intracommunal violence against women in the past and in the present, contemporary enunciative practices minimize at best and at worst negate black women's suffering, preferring still to endow them with both superhuman and subhuman attributes. It is as though both dominant *and* oppositional spokespeople refuse to acknowledge the incisive vocabularies that astute black cultural commentators, political workers and feminists have created for over 200 years. Hence one writer who, in many other instances, has drawn pointedly eloquent

²⁰⁵In September 2014, McBride's killer was convicted and sentenced to seventeen years in prison.

²⁰⁶Quoted in “Criminalizing Black Corpses’: No Charges Filed after White Man kills Detroit Teen Renisha McBride.” *Democracy Now: A Daily Independent Global News Hour with Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez*. *DemocracyNow.Org*. November 13, 2013.

connections between current social crises and the historical context of cultural discourses and institutions in the United States, experiences startlingly expressive crisis when confronted with McBride's death. After rehearsing the publicly known information about the killing in a brief article, he concludes: "I haven't written much on this case, because I don't know what else to offer beyond my deep skepticism of the courts as a likely resolution."²⁰⁷ The history of black women's symbolic denigration and material terrorization is not a hidden one because, sadly, it always has been interwoven with that of black men's. Elisions that neglect to recognize that interconnectedness imply that black women deserve their violation and that they can always handle more.

So where do we go from here?

Breeder. Mammy. Matriarch. Welfare Queen. Baby Mama.... "Mom-in-Chief." The last was enunciated in a public act of self-naming. I could not conclude a project on the African American maternal figure without remarking on Michelle Obama, the current First Lady, the most visible black mother in the United States and indeed the world. She wields enough power to announce herself "Mom-in-Chief" but she also has been called an "angry black woman," "outspoken," "Stokeley Carmichael in a Dress," a "feminist nightmare," a "strong black woman," "Sista Friend," and "Mother of the Nation." Her visual image has ranged from afro-wearing, fist-bumping, rifle-toting caricature on the cover of *The New Yorker* to fashion icon on the cover of *Vogue* and *Jet* to adored and adoring wife and mother on the covers of *Essence* and *Ebony*. A collection of black

²⁰⁷Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case of Renisha McBride," *The Atlantic.Com*. November 18, 2013.

women-authored letters, *Go, Tell Michelle: African American Women Write to the First Lady*²⁰⁸, overwhelmingly applauds her decision to include her mother in the White House household and to publicly emphasize her own maternal identity. At the same time, self-identified feminists—predominantly white—have bemoaned that decision to accentuate the motherhood role above her significant professional accomplishments.

There has been such fixation on her arms—their apparent strength, toning, length, muscularity, desirability, and (in)appropriate exposure—that one must recognize their synecdochic function in the centuries-long discourse that surrounds the black female body: does it threaten or nurture? *could* it be beautiful or is it only abject?²⁰⁹ Indeed, I strongly suspect that in many instances the focus on Michelle Obama's arms is not entirely unrelated to the historical fetishism of black women's buttocks—but with a shift. Is it a coincidence that, now, when white female models are displayed in order to illustrate the desirability of high, rounded buttocks—the kind which, outside of the black and Latino communities, were denigrated as evidence of both excessive carnality and undesirability—that another part of Obama's body has been made to carry the symbolic weight of her unprecedented occupation?

Yet I did not fully confront what Michelle Obama's position meant to me until she announced the establishment of the White House vegetable garden. Although I lauded her attention to physical fitness and food (in)security, I questioned her

²⁰⁸Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009.

²⁰⁹Besides Michelle Obama, the professional tennis players, Venus and Serena Williams arguably have been the public figures whose bodies have attracted comparably discursive scrutiny.

announcement that she would work alongside others in this garden. Would she wear a head rag? Would photographers take faceless pictures that made her indistinguishable from other “workers?” Would the other gardeners be African Americans? Would she be photographed in excessively soiled clothing? In other words, would this garden, surrounding a White House partially built by slaves, be too evocative of plantation slavery and share-cropping, a symbolically atavistic return to scenes of trauma and oppression that would not empower but only confirm African Americans’ supposed natural place in the eyes of the world? I need not have worried. Footage and photographs have shown a stylishly-garbed First Lady who is clearly in charge of the often multiracial group of citizens that surrounds her; a woman who could not possibly be mistaken for “the help;” a woman who, I have come to believe, is perhaps only too keenly aware of the symbolic weight of the history out of which she has grown. But my visceral response to Michelle Obama’s announcement signals to me that when long searches lead us to back to the roses and thorns of our mothers’ gardens²¹⁰, we discover beauty, yes, but the pain still lingers.

²¹⁰As countless others have done, I appropriate Alice Walker’s enduring language and image here. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 1983.

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